

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY

Seventh Sunday of Easter - May 23, 2004

Theme for May: Everyday Spirituality

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Acts 16:16-34

For Our Reflection:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?
- Mary Oliver, New and Selected Poems p.94

Everyday Spirituality: Right Livelihood (Work)

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,

the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined the save
the only life you could save.

- Mary Oliver, "The Journey," New and Selected Poems pp. 114-15

How does one come to choose auctioneer or dental assistant or prison guard or teacher - as a life's work? Do we choose or are we led or do circumstances dictate our livelihood? I would think that circumstances are more influential for those of us with fewer resources - and choices are increasingly available to those of us with correspondingly increasing resources. Personality and temperament, self-awareness and motivation, willingness to take risks, personal and societal freedom, and sheer luck would also seem to shape one's career path.

2000 years ago in Philippi, a Roman city, there was a slave girl about whom this story was told. She was possessed by "a spirit of the python" - a spirit associated with the Oracle at Delphi. The girl told fortunes for money, divined the true nature of people and their life path. She made quite a bit of money - for her owners.

Was her "spirit" a gift or a curse? An illness or an occupation? A component of her slavery or a relief from it's usual imperatives? This is not clear in the story. But it IS clear that her behavior in certain circumstances was annoying to some people - including Paul and Silas. So Paul sent the python packing - leaving the girl with - what? Her own voice? Zero career options? Angry owners and a beating? The possibility of being cut loose from her owners and joining Paul in his travels? or being taken in by Lydia's household to help with the dying and selling of purple cloth?

The slave girl may be a vehicle for a Christian "miracle" story. But, for me, she is not incidental. She is not one of those characters destined to die because she has no name and wears the costume of an "extra." She raises important questions for us - as does the jailer with no name who is only doing his job.

The slave girl's owners - whose occupation is not stated and who MAY have had ONLY the income from the slave girl to survive on - although that is doubtful - are angry about the lost income. They trump up charges against Paul and Silas, have them arrested, flogged and jailed. That night an earthquake breaks the jail open like an egg - much like the earthquake that shook the Jerusalem Temple at the crucifixion. The jailer, thinking all the prisoners have escaped, commences to commit suicide in shame for having failed at his assigned task. Paul's shouting stops his hand and converts the jailer and his household to Christianity.

Does the man continue to work as a jailer?

Does he get promoted to prison superintendent?

Does his new faith lead him to a new occupation - prison chaplain, perhaps - offering conversion and baptism to criminals and political dissidents alike? Do he and the slave girl open a Christian gift shop in Philippi?

These are things we will never know. But the questions these people raise are important ones for us - now - here. Is our livelihood circumstantial or chosen? Is our livelihood at the expense of others or in the service of others or for the benefit of all parties? Is our livelihood a gift or a curse? An illness or an occupation? A course of action or a frightened, aimless Reaction? Does our faith - newly born or lifelong - have any influence whatsoever over our employment choices and situations?

The director of health, aging and church relations (or some such thing) at the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia, was asked how on earth he came to his profession. The delightful answer was this, "Some people follow a career trajectory; others follow relationships and run for the light. I was one of the latter." This explained a lot about my own life.

Career trajectories are for people with focus and well-defined interests - like dental hygienists and probate lawyers and astrophysicists. Relationships and Light are for tinkers like me - who like to do a lot of things, get bored quickly with any one task, and are better at change than maintenance.

I thought for years that I went into ordained ministry because it was the family business. I did not experience an unmistakable tap on the shoulder from God and know immediately what it was I had to do - as a number of my seminary friends had. For me it was much more like Mary

Oliver's poem:

...But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.

So I figured that I had chosen the family business because it was familiar, I knew the players and

most of the rules and SOMEBODY needed to do it and to do it RIGHT. My mother's grandparents were Methodist Ministers - her grandmother ordained to preach to women, grandfather ordained to preach to anybody who would listen. My father's grandfather was president of a large synagogue in Philadelphia - and, with a name like Cohen, you can bet there were rabbis and cantors before him. My mother and aunt both married ministers - and both worked in professions assisting OTHERS to discern and enter their authentic vocation.

My siblings are teachers and cops, doctors and missionaries, service providers and parents. They are all in lay forms of ministry - but very few of them arrived at their current livelihood on a straight career trajectory. We have all wandered and tinkered, followed relationships and run toward the light. And the family business has persevered and prevailed.

I believe, in retrospect, that I can see a pattern in all of our journeys. When any of us were stuck or confused, we invested heavily in discernment and retraining. We talked with therapists, did the two-step and the twelve steps, got career advice and articulated our "portable portfolio of skills and gifts," called together Clearness Committees, journaled, prayed, engaged in HOLY LISTENING, and kicked ourselves loose from destructive or aimless situations.

We have learned to use our weaknesses for good and to build on our strengths within reason. We have worked hard to overcome circumstances, wrestled our power out of the hands of others and taught ourselves to talk in our own voices - most of the time.

My brother attended 13 colleges in 15 years earning an Masters Degree in Business Administration - while building an entrepreneurial business with his best friend, acquiring rental properties for income, graduating at the top of his class at the police academy and becoming a sergeant in the department, marrying an artist and raising two daughters in a beautiful house by the sea in Solana Beach. Not bad for a Tinker.

With increasing luck, opportunity and more enlightened choices – my siblings and I have made progress toward understanding, following and practicing our authentic vocations, listening for our callings, finally doing those things we had always hoped to do with our "one wild and precious life." And God has been far from absent in our wanderings...

I have come to believe that every heartbeat is God's hand squeezing life into us - one pulse at a time - communicating our purpose at the most primary levels of our being. Our lives are literally in God's hands. So it makes sense to listen to that voice within - that murmurs in the rhythm of our own pulsing blood - that tells us what it is we are meant to do - what it is we are called to accomplish, be, become, leave in our wake - be remembered for in the eternal memory of God.

I would like to believe that the early Christian community offered the slave-girl and the jailer more choices, more chances to hear their own callings. I am hoping that this Christian community offers more choices and chances for Holy Listening to all who enter here. And I am grateful for the Christian community which has made room for this tinker to find her way among relationships and swaths of light - toward my destiny and home.

Bulletin

WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship

"Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being
to receive, to carry, and to give back."

Let us do so now - with body, soul, mind and spirit.

+ Opening Hymn A Song Must Rise CSB # 76

+ Opening Prayer (responsive)

One: Cloak yourself in a thousand ways; still shall I know you, my
Beloved.

Many: Veil yourself with every enchantment and yet I shall feel you,
Presence most dear, close and intimate.

One: I shall salute you in the springing of cypresses
and in the sheen of lakes, the laughter of fountains.

Many: I shall surely see you in tumbling clouds,
in brightly embroidered meadows.

One: Oh, Beloved Presence, more beautiful than all the stars together,

Many: I trace your face in ivy that climbs, in clusters of grapes,
in morning flaming the mountains, in the clear arch of sky.

One: You gladden the whole earth and make every heart great.

Many: You are the breathing of the world.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)

Creator God who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, And forgive us our debts As we
forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil, For Thine is the
kingdom and the power And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection (you may be seated)

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God is the breathing of the world.. Blessed Be!

Sung Response "Hallelujah. God be praised!" (CSB #5

Refrain)

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

The Just Peace Reflection was introduced to our worship service by our Just Peace Committee. It is a weekly reminder of the need for social justice in order to create a peaceful world.

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children Frederick by Leo Lionni

Reading from the Christian Scriptures Acts 16:16-34

Sermon Right Livelihood (Work)

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragement

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response In Solitude Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

"Look to your heart that flutters in and out like a moth, God is not indifferent to your need. You have a thousand prayers but God has one." Let us not be indifferent to one another. Amen.

+ Sending Hymn O for a World Hymnal # 575

+ Commissioning (unison)

"Be ye lamps unto yourselves, be your own confidence. Hold to the truth within yourselves as to the only lamp." It is the Mystery of the Universe that beats within the human heart. Practice Holy Listening and be led by the Voice of Creation.

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle) Hymnal # 236

Halle, halle, halle - lu - ja, Halle, halle, halle - lu - ja,

Halle, halle, halle - lu - ja, Halleluja, halleluja.

+ Postlude

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship is based on words by Dag Hammarskjold, Singing the Living Tradition #455

Opening Prayer is from the Islamic tradition, Shams Ud-Dun, Mohammad Hafiz, SLT #607

Prayer of Dedication is based on a poem by Anne Sexton, SLT #672

Commissioning is based on words from the Buddhist tradition, SLT #679