

It Don't Come Easy

I got an earworm this week. Do you know what an earworm is? That's the new-ish term for a song that comes into your head for no apparent reason and won't go away. We've all had it happen, right? Probably the most infamous earworm, and I hesitate even to mention it because a lot of you will go home humming it, is "It's a Small World After All." To those of you who are now stuck with that earworm, my apologies. But my earworm this week was Ringo Starr's first U.S. hit following the break-up of the Beatles, a song written by his erstwhile band-mate George Harrison called "It Don't Come Easy." Actually, unlike most earworms, I know why this tune came unbidden to my mind. It's because of Paul and his letter to the Philippians.

Does that sound like a stretch? Well, my mind works in sort of peculiar ways sometimes. I was reading Philippians and thinking again how amazing Paul's sense of joy and faith were as he wrote to his friends in Philippi from prison. I started thinking of all the tribulations that Paul faced and how most of us, me included, would be more likely to find that personal history a cause for singin' the blues rather than praising God. And then the song came into my mind: "It don't come easy/You know it don't come easy/You got to pay your dues if you want to sing the blues/And you know it don't come easy.../And this trouble vine keeps growing all the time/And you know it just ain't easy..."

Things didn't come easy for Paul. Do you remember the passage in his second letter to the Corinthians when he listed what he had been through? It's in II Corinthians 11, verses 24 – 28: "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches." It was a hard, dangerous road for the first Christians and especially for those few first missionaries.

And now, in the book of Philippians, we find Paul in prison, locked up for preaching the Good News of Christ Jesus. And if that wasn't enough, Paul writes, there are preachers abroad who are "proclaim(ing) Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment." We don't really know what these people were preaching, whether Paul was agonizing over them simply because they were being self-aggrandizing in their practice of ministry, or if they were Paul's theological opponents, the Judaizers, and his anguish was that they were spreading a false gospel, or if, in fact, they were hyper-revolutionaries, so anxious for a confrontation with the Empire that they were setting up Paul and other Christians, as well as themselves, as targets for Imperial retaliation. The specifics probably don't matter; they were making Paul squirm.

There may be preachers today who make us squirm in a similar way. I'm not talking about the ones who prick our consciences – those are the ones who are doing a good job and we should be glad to hear them. I'm talking about the ones whose demeanor or message strike us as wanting, somehow; the ones who call attention to themselves rather than Christ, or whose message seems more like Bad News than Good to us. I can think of some I have heard over the years who strike me in that way. But I am admonished by Paul's attitude. "What does it matter? Just this, that

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Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.” When we pray, as we did earlier for God to “give us eyes to recognize your reflection in the eyes of Christians everywhere; (to) give us a mind to accept and celebrate our differences; (to) give us a heart big enough to love your children everywhere,” then we must remember that this extends not just to the friendly Presbyterians and Lutherans whose churches bracket ours on 196th Street, and with whom we come together for various projects but also to the more conservative sisters and brothers of our own Baptist movement who think we are dangerous heretics, or the Pentecostals or emergents whose worship styles we find odd, or the Orthodox immigrants who wish to remain culturally distinct from the rest of us. They are proclaiming Christ just as we do, with all the understanding with which God has blessed us today. We see through a glass, darkly. Only later will we see face to face.

So Paul finds a healthy measure of peace and joy, even in his confinement and persecution, even with opponents both within and without the family of faith. He remains confident that however his situation ends, with his release or with his death, “Christ will be exalted now as always.” Still, it is enough to make him ponder the great existential question of life versus death. “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.”

It is a remarkable meditation, in part because it is so other-centered, so focused on Christ and Christ's people. Contrast it, if you will, with that other great rumination on life and death from Shakespeare's Hamlet: “To be or not to be: that is the question.” Like Paul, Hamlet has suffered from “The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” Like Paul, Hamlet remembers a past and foresees a future full of “the whips and scorns of time,/The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,/The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,/The insolence of office and the spurns/That patient merit of the unworthy takes...” But while Hamlet sees life's continuing struggle as pointless, Paul sees his struggles as inspiration for others and glory for Christ. Remember where we began this reading: “I want you to know, beloved that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel... and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.”

As we think of Paul and Hamlet, respectively, considering life or death, we remember that Hamlet is dissuaded from longing for death by fear. “To die, to sleep;/To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;/For in that sleep of death what dreams may come/When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,/Must give us pause... the dread of something after death,/The undiscover'd country from whose bourn/No traveller returns, puzzles the will/And makes us rather bear those ills we have/Than fly to others that we know not of...” But for Paul, “living is Christ and dying is gain... my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better...” Writing at about the same time Will Shakespeare was producing his plays, the Puritan theologian Richard Sibbes wrote, “St Paul's desire was *spiritual*... This desire came from a *taste of sweetness in communion with Christ*; and those desires that most ravish the soul in apprehension of heavenly things are ever the most holy. St Paul knew what a sweet communion Christ was.” There is no fear in death for Paul, only the anticipation of joy. So may it be for all of us as we anticipate our ultimate communion with Jesus and the One he called Father.

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So what kept the imprisoned, beleaguered Paul from, to paraphrase Hamlet, making his quietus with a bare bodkin, ending it all and fleeing to the awaiting arms of Christ, stealing away home? Again, his focus was on other people, not himself: “my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.” Paul is going to hold out as long as he can, to encourage his friend’s with letters and to live in the hope of working among them once again. It’s worth remembering in this context that the hymn to which I just alluded and which we sang earlier, “Steal Away to Jesus,” was not initially sung as a funeral hymn, although that’s how it is most often heard now. One of the classic antebellum Negro Spirituals, “Steal Away” was used as a signal by slaves to indicate an upcoming clandestine meeting or even a planned attempt to escape to the freedom of the Northern states. The promise of freedom for those men and women, just as for Paul, was not an occasion to lie down and await the deliverance of death, but rather an impetus to boldly go, to pursue the freedom that God intends for all humankind: freedom from the chains of slavery, freedom from the chains of sin. “Steal Away” is a call of encouragement for us to follow the way of Christ, just as Paul did.

And that is exactly where Paul turns as well at the end of his thoughts on life and death. “Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.” Paul understands that walking in the way of Jesus is not just about doing what is convenient or only being faithful in good times. It is precisely during times of opposition and struggle that we learn what the way of Jesus is really all about and understand its value for us and others. Pastor Christopher B. Harbin of Central Baptist Church in Arrington, Virginia, writes, “Paul says that life’s hardships are opportunities to join in Christ Jesus’ suffering. They are gateways to better understanding the depths of God’s love and grace. They are opportunities for us to become more like Christ Jesus and less like the complaining, distrustful Hebrews in the wilderness.” The times of struggle are a challenge to each of us to compare our lives to that of Jesus, Paul and the heroes of our faith. Reverend Andy Campbell of the Church of Scotland says, “The ability to be able to make the most of every opportunity, regardless of the cost to self, is commendable. The ability to see and meet the needs of others at your own cost, is discipleship. To put self behind and follow Christ can become more than fine words from the Bible pages when they are practiced in the furnace of injustice, pain and the threat of harm.” We are called to face trials with discipleship collectively as well as individually. Here’s a final quote from another theologian, Bruce Epperly of Lancaster Theological Seminary, which I found particularly apt for the situation at Good Shepherd: “Suffering calls us to be persons of character, whose experience of pain and disability does not prevent us from reaching out to others in Christ-like ways. This is true for congregations as well as persons. Even when the congregation is struggling to meet its budget, God calls the church to generosity... we are challenged in difficult times to embrace life’s challenges as well as God’s call to creative transformation and care for others.”

And so, over the centuries and the miles, Paul speaks to us as well as to the Philippians. We received with joy his comforting words of love and reassurance. Let us also receive with joy his challenge. Let us be sure that in the hard days ahead, as our national economy convulses, as we face opposition, as we consider life and death and what they mean for us and for our loved ones, let us be sure that we are living our lives “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Let us be

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sure that we are “standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by (our) opponents... For (God) has graciously granted (us) the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.”

Does this seem too hard? Am I being unrealistic? Are the days of the saints and great martyrs and their courage lost in dim history? Let's consider the more modern example of Horatio Spafford. A Chicago businessman a little over a hundred years ago, Spafford had invested heavily in real estate along the shores of Lake Michigan. His holdings were wiped out by the great Chicago Fire of 1871. In an attempt to put sorrow behind, he arranged a European trip for his family but on the eve of their departure he was detained by more business details. His wife and four daughters sailed ahead but on their trans-Atlantic journey, their ship, the SS Ville du Havre, was struck by another vessel and sank in twelve minutes. Only his wife escaped among their family. Spafford sailed to join his grief-stricken wife in Wales, where survivors had been taken. Near the spot where the Ville du Havre had gone down, he wrote these words: “When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.”

Like Paul, Horatio Spafford understood the sweetness of communion with Christ, in spite of circumstance. Like Paul, he understood that the way of Christ is to find goodness and triumph in the face of terrible adversity. Spafford and his wife went on to found the American Colony in Jerusalem, which ministered to the physical needs of the poor and the sick regardless of religious affiliation until the late 1940s. Their legacy reaches our own time as their headquarters, now the American Colony Hotel, hosted the Israeli-Palestinian talks that resulted in the Oslo Peace Accord of 1993.

We come today to the table of the Lord. We come seeking communion with each other, with Christians of all denominations all around the world and that sweetest communion of all, with Christ. Let us take the words and work of Horatio Spafford, of Paul and of Christ to inspire us to live lives worthy of the Good News, for enveloped in the love of Christ Jesus as we are, truly it is well with our souls.