

Text: Acts 16: 16-36
Title: 'round Midnight
Date: 05.16.10
Roger Allen Nelson

On Tuesday morning I was the caboose to the train of people that roared into Dr. David Baar's choir room to surprise him with the news that he was named a "Golden Apple" winner. There were friends and family and foundation members and reporters and administrators and a joyous-raucous-racket. It was a wonderful moment.

After the announcement, and some general merriment, somebody asked the choir to sing. So, with face beaming and that unmistakable bounce, Dave directed the choir in the Providence Saint Mel mission song.

A little back story: On Good Friday, thirty some years ago, the Archdiocese of Chicago told the staff at Providence Saint Mel not to come back on Monday. They were closing the school. The problems were too hard and the obstacles were too high. The neighborhood was too rough and the cost was too steep. But, Paul Adams, the principle, got on the phone over the weekend and called the teachers back saying, "I'm going to keep the school open. I don't know how I will pay you, or how we will move forward, but we're not going to let these students down...."

Today, Providence Saint Mel is a K through 12 college prep school that places 100% of their students in college, and 50% of them in top tier or Ivy League schools. It is remarkable story of vision and grit and hope.

Each day the students at Providence Saint Mel begin the day with prayer, the pledge of the allegiance, and the school mission statement. Everybody says it every day. A few years ago Dave Baar thought it could be put to music, a gospel musician was commissioned, and today that mission statement is both said and sung.

So, on Tuesday morning the choir broke into song, Dave bounced, and that song rose and fell with a simple gospel grace, building to a last line crescendo that was repeated and modulated and clapped. The last line:

*With God's help we will either find a way or make one.
With God's help we will either find a way or make one.
With God's help we will...*

And, it was unmistakable that buried deep in the heart of each of those students was a song. There was a lyric that sparked their imaginations, animated their lives, and helped draw them forward.

Dear friends, I invite to consider this morning that there is a song at the heart of things. We all have some manner of song at the heart of life.

It is a tired and tawdry marriage that doesn't have a love song at its heart.
Nations have anthems that capture their best hopes.
Ethnicities have songs that are the glue of history and identity.
Colleges have fight songs, churches have hymns, and products have ditties.

At the core of the human enterprise there is music.

There are songs that sustain us, and carry us, and capture what is essential to us. I don't just mean the rock-n-roll-rebel-yell of a young man roaring out of the school parking lot with windows down and radio blaring or the sublime lilt of a favorite Bach chorale. I don't mean that there is always a specific song..... But, I do mean something more fundamental, something that defines and unites and inspires who we are and who we hope to be ~ the song at the heart of it.

What is the song of your life?

What is the song that is at the heart of things for you?

What music is essential and sustaining for you?

What would you like sung at your funeral?

Get at it this way: What would you sing to start every morning?

Or, get at it this way: What would you sing at night in prison?

Because, that just might be the test of a tune; that might be where the mettle of a song is tested. How does your song hold up in prison? How does it sing when life is harsh and brutal? Is it big enough to live by? Can it bear the whole weight of life?

Maybe that is part of what makes this story of Paul and Silas so enduring and endearing. Strip away the drama of screaming demons, jailers going from suicide to baptism, earthquakes, jail breaks, and exorcisms, and you have a prison story.

Paul and Silas are hauled off and roughed up by the military police. For some reason, even as they are stripped and beat by the guards, Paul keeps silent about his Roman citizenship. He could have spoken up in his own defense and changed the dynamic, but with bruised limbs and bloodied backs they are tossed into the dank dark stone hole of the inner cells.

Paul and Silas couldn't help but be a little discouraged by the turn of events ~ they were in Philippi because of a dream, they'd followed the outward ripple of the Spirit, and now their legs were locked in stocks. Solitary confinement is not the freedom of the gospel they anticipated and yet 'round midnight they sing! The music echoes off the prison walls, bounces into the prison yard, overflows to other prisoners, and they sing the song that holds up in prison.

What is the song of your life?

What is the song that is at the heart of things for you?

What would you sing at night in prison?

I got an e-mail from a young woman who grew up in Hope Church, was working in the cosmetics and beauty industry, and recently completed a graduate degree in psychology. She wrote:

I'm still working, but only 18 hours a week, so it's much better than before, but I still hate makeup and beauty and the self-loathing women feel without it. As cheesy as it may sound, I can't wait until I can start from the root of those problems with people instead of pacifying them temporarily.

She has learned that the songs of this world fail.

The songs of beauty and body shape,
the songs of buying more stuff,
the songs of self loathing,
the songs of achievement and conquest,
the songs of individualism and independence,
the songs of national and political allegiance,
all of them finally fail.

When everything is stripped away, and it is a dark night in prison, the songs of this world are frail and feeble. They are lies. They are temporary or transitory. The songs of this world are like Top Forty summertime tunes ~ great hooks, good beat, easy to dance to, eventually annoying, and ultimately as sustaining as bubble gum.

Paul and Silas were Jews. In the middle of the night they were singing the songs of their faith tradition ~ the songs that they knew by heart. Maybe for the first time they were beginning to see Jesus in the lyrics and imagery of their old songs. They could have sung to fight off fear, they could have sung out of habit, they could have sung with gusto and good humor, but however they sang they had a song that could be sung in the darkest prison cell. They sang about God. In the words of Charles Spurgeon:

Any fool can sing in the day. It is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight; but the skillful singer is he who can sing when there is not a ray of light to read by. Songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of men.

Could it be that simple? That finally, at midnight, with everything else is stripped away, when everything else fails, when our best laid plans and our earnest efforts fall short, all we have is the song of faith that God is.

We trust that God will be there.
We trust that God will catch us.
We trust that God will not leave us alone.
We trust that all of this is held in God's hands.

What is that song of God that sustained Paul and Silas?

What song would shake the earth and rattle open jailhouse doors and unlock shackles?

The song that unfolds in Acts, the song that ripples out from the resurrection, the song that is sung by Dorcas and Lydia and Peter, is that.....

You are loved and accepted by God in Christ. Whatever law or legal standard was required for right relationship with God has been met by Christ. You are free from trying to prove your worth by what you do or what you don't do. You are free from the confines of ethnicity. Everybody eats at God's house. God in Christ has the last word over whatever is dark or demonic or has the stink of death. You are free and forgiven from whatever binds you.

What do you need to do?

Trust? Repent? Believe? Love? Sing!

Dear friends, faith is rarely an abstraction in scripture. It is rarely set of statements or a disembodied list of beliefs. It is barely a noun. More often than not faith is a verb ~ it is an action or a movement. Faith is more like energy, or water, or music, it surges, ebbs, flows, and rises to expression. And, so with all hell breaking loose, Paul and Silas sing and faith finds expression. Faith is more like singing than sermonizing.

In “The Return of Ansel Gibbs,” an early novel by Frederick Buechner, a seminary professor, Dr. Henry Kuykendall, exhorts a group of seminarians concerning the serious nature of their confession:

Every morning you should wake in your beds and ask yourself: ‘Can I believe it all again today?’ No, better still, don’t ask it till after you’ve read, The New York Times, till after you’ve studied that daily record of the world’s brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your Bible. Then ask yourself if you can believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day. If some morning the answer happens to really be ‘Yes,’ it should be a ‘Yes’ that’s choked back with confession and tears and great laughter. Not a beatific smile, but the laughter of wonderful incredulity.

Sometimes the song is hard to hear over the chaos of creation,
sometimes the song gets stuck in our throats,
sometimes the song is choked off,
and sometimes the song is incredulous and irrational.
But, this morning may we sing with tears and great laughter.
For, whether in prison in Philippi or Abu Ghraib,
whether infant or elderly
whether serious church go-er or just wandering by,
whether in cancer ward or nursing home,
whether wrestling with God or dancing with delight,
whether darkest night or brightest day,
sing because you are free in Christ Jesus.

Sing, because at the heart of it all, God himself is with us.
And that song of God will never falter or fail.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.
Amen.