

“From Doubt to Dancing”
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Based on 2 Samuel 6:1-19
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Several years ago, after twenty-seven years of confirmed atheism, my long-time friend Pilar was baptized into a Presbyterian congregation in upstate New York. At the age of twenty-eight, she became a deacon in that church and has matured faster spiritually than anyone I’ve ever known. Part of that rapid maturity may be due to an experience she had not long after her baptism. In no small measure due to her new-found faith and a distinct sense of call, my friend turned down a comfortable offer to work as a school psychologist in a cushy suburban school district. She turned down this prestigious offer, and its much larger salary package, to work with emotional troubled boys at a residential facility. And not long after she began, she was very nearly strangled to death by one of the boys she counseled.

The questions which formed in her mind following that event were many and varied, but not the least troubling of which was her wondering where God was in the midst of that near-tragedy, and how it was that her calling to help troubled teens resulted in her gasping for breath as the very one she tried to help wrapped his hands around her throat. She found it difficult to sleep, difficult to return to her office, and difficult to pray. She asked the most troubling but also the most honest questions a Christian can ask, the ones like “Why me?” And if each of us is honest, we might own up to shaking a fist or two at God while questioning what seems like the divine absence from not only our own personal tragedies, but the tragedies from which we are hard pressed to escape as we read the morning paper or watch the evening news.

I suspect that the family of Uzzah was asking some of these same questions, questions made all the more acute because it was not an emotionally imbalanced young man who took the life of their son and brother, but their very own God, the God whom they had faithfully served for more than twenty years guarding a long forgotten, but still potentially powerful piece of religious furniture. And to add to their bewilderment must have been the knowledge that poor Uzzah was just trying to make sure that the hopes and dreams of a newly minted nation, not to mention the ark itself, did not shatter into a million pieces because the oxen stepped in a hole. Remembering back to the story in 1 Samuel 6, we find that the ark of the covenant, the container holding the stone tablets of the law given to Moses, had been camped out in Abinadab's house ever since the Philistines, and various cities and families of the Israelites, had played hot potato with it following its capture by Israel's historic enemy. You see, the ark was so holy that it caused great panic, illness, and even death to those who came into contact with it without following the ordinances proscribed for caring for it. But somehow, Abinadab and his sons, Eleazar, Uzzah, and Ahio, had managed for quite a long time to avoid the plagues and terrors associated with possession of the ark. And so you might see why Abinadab's family might be prone to asking the "why me?" question in the face of what must have surely seemed at least like divine unfairness, but maybe even more like divine indifference, and I'm not sure which of these would be the worse feeling.

We might imagine that King David was also asking that "Why me?" question. After all, he was trying to honor God by restoring the ark to both a physical and symbolic place in the life of Israel. He had gathered a huge military escort, and created an appropriately festive atmosphere with music and dancing. He

was pleased to be the escort of the divine. And so, when tragedy strikes, his plans are shattered, and with it, his confidence in God and himself. Fear overtakes him and he stashes the ark yet again in someone's house, no doubt lamenting the divine unfairness, or indifference, he and all Israel had just experienced.

The questions of seeming divine unfairness or indifference and "why me?" are ones which really have no satisfactory answer. Every temporary answer leads us to more vexing questions. And we all know people who will simply dismiss the Christian faith because those questions cannot be answered. Perhaps before they give up on God, they should hear Gerald Sittser's story, a story which has helped me a great deal in sorting all this out.

Gerald Sittser lost his wife, and his young daughter, and his mother in an automobile accident and confronted this achingly difficult question of "why me?" His "why" story was no more or less spectacular than any other why story but it was his perspective on it that was profound yet in the end, simple, given our Christian tradition. Sittser turned the question of "why me?" on its head and instead asked, "Why not me." Yes, he suffered a great loss. Yes, his hopes and dreams were dashed. But after reflecting on his tragedy, this is what he says: "So why not me? Can I expect to live an entire lifetime free of disappointment and suffering? Free of loss and pain? The very expectation strikes me as not only unrealistic but also arrogant. God spare me from such a perfect life."

I think Sittser's perspective is one that comes as a shock to the system because we are used to thinking that life is fair, that we deserve to lead a happy, productive life. And I'm not sure I would use his insight when consoling someone in the midst of their own tragedy because Sittser's perspective comes with some

distance, rather like finally seeing the forest after walking among the tall trees. But I think he is on the right track when he begins to look at his question in terms of grace. He goes on to say this: “The problem of expecting to live in a perfectly fair world is that there is no grace in that world, for grace is grace only when it is undeserved.” Let me say that again: “The problem of expecting to live in a perfectly fair world is that there is no grace in that world, for grace is grace only when it is undeserved.”

Perhaps in the three months between Uzzah’s death, and the final entrance of the ark into Jerusalem, David had time to consider this grace. Perhaps he had time to look back on the characters throughout his people’s history who experienced grace they never deserved, people like Adam and Eve, who by rights should have died eating the apple but were spared, and the patriarch Jacob who was a really nasty and manipulative person, but who was blessed by God and renamed Israel, and Jacob’s sons who out of spite and jealousy sold their brother Joseph into slavery but were blessed by him later. I will give King David the benefit of the doubt and not attribute his second attempt at bringing the ark to Jerusalem to a belief that there was something to be gained, or that it was simply safer, now that the household of Obed-Edom had been blessed. I think he must surely have seen it still as a risk, but a risk he was willing to take because he knew there was some of that grace involved. I choose to believe that David came to an understanding of “Why not me?” and decided that he had to look forward into the future relying on the grace revealed in the past.

What is so hard for us to understand, but what I think Gerald Sittser finally grasped, is that the power of God to strike down people like Uzzah, (or what may

seem like the powerlessness to stop it) is nothing compared to the power of God to heal those who are left behind. I doubt that Mr. Bud Welch knows Gerald Sittser, but they are certainly bound together by tragedy, and by the healing that can take place with a little grace. Bud Welch's daughter, Julie, worked for the Social Security Administration in Oklahoma City until her life ended when Timothy McVeigh blew up the Murrah Federal Office Building. Bud Welch grieved, he grieved deeply, he was filled with anger and resentment and even hatred. He was a man in serious pain, in serious need of healing. Sometime in the blur of the months that followed the bombing, he saw a news report that showed a picture of Bill McVeigh, Timothy's father, working in his garden. And as much as he hated this man for what his son had done, that image stuck with him profoundly, for in Bill McVeigh's face, he saw himself, a father who had lost a child, a father grieving, and in pain, doing his best to cope. And not long after, Bud Welch came to realize that his pain and hatred were eating him up inside and he began to wonder if his daughter Julie would even be able to recognize what he had become, for in her, he could remember no hate that would recognize his own hate.

So it was three years later, as Bud Welch was trying to change his attitude about the bombing, and becoming an opponent of a death penalty he once wholeheartedly embraced, that he acted upon that quick TV image of Bill McVeigh, and he made arrangements to meet Bill at his home in Buffalo. The two men met and talked and cried together. And Bud met Bill's daughter Jennifer who he found to be so much like his own Julie. The three of them visited for nearly two hours and as Bud went to leave, he hugged Jennifer, a woman who could be his own daughter yet was the sister of the man who had killed his own daughter, and he says that they

“held each other tight, both of us crying. I don’t know about Jennifer, but I was thinking that I’d gone to church all my life and had never felt as close to God as I did at that moment.” “We’re in this together,” he told Jennifer and Bill, “For the rest of our lives. We can’t change the past, but we have a choice about the future. We have a choice about the future.” These two families have remained in touch with one another, each helping the other and doing their best to cope with their suffering and the loss of a child, each experiencing grace where they expected none. And Bud Welch continues trying to work against the hate which led to the deaths of both their children

I think it is a sign of the perspective David must have gained about God’s grace that he was able to dance again before the ark, and dance with such abandon that his wife was ashamed of him and chastised him for losing control the way no King should do. Many people who suffer terrible losses think they will never again do the things they once did: smile, laugh, enjoy a special but now painful place, celebrate the birthday of a loved one now gone. Perhaps David thought he would never dance again, that once burned, twice shy, he would not have that pleasure or honor again. But that’s the funny and powerful thing about God’s healing grace, that we are able to put some distance between our “Why me?” questions and our futures, and find the strength to dance again.

I want to suggest that as we struggle with the tragedies that we all inevitably face, that we try to remember that we will dance again. And when that time for dancing returns, that we dance with abandon and celebration as David did, remembering that through God’s grace in Jesus Christ, we have been freed from fear and death to live for righteousness and, in the words of an old hymn “to sing

and joyful be, singing through eternity.” That freedom is what makes our singing, and our dancing possible. That freedom is what makes Bud Welch able to embrace the family of his daughter’s killer and that freedom is what enables Gerald Sittser to find grace even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Friends, it is not very emotionally satisfying to leave the judgment of Timothy McVeigh or the teenager who attacked my friend in the hands of God. There is something unresolved about that approach. But reflecting, perhaps as David did, on the history of undeserved grace meted out by our loving God, can help us come to terms with what we find so hard to understand. Perhaps we would do well to remember the example given to us by Christ, who, in the letter of First Peter we are told “entrusted himself to the one who judges justly” and who asked on the cross that his crucifiers be forgiven for their ignorance.

I will leave the last word with Gerald Sittser, he who lost everything but found something grace-filled in the process. He says this: “So, God spare us a life of fairness! To live in a world with grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world might make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We might get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that is and whether or not we would really be satisfied. A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even in our suffering.” Amen.