

FROM PRISON

Texts on Sunday, November 15, 2009

Psalm 88

Ten years ago this month, I joined a weekly conversation underway with prisoners at Attica since just after the riots there in 1971. About a dozen men in greens gather in a circle with three or four volunteers to talk about whatever comes up, provided it's personal. The men are always keen on this opportunity to think and feel their way through their lives. And to them, the volunteers are a sign that they are not altogether forgotten.

Most of the men, I would learn, had ten years inside, or far more, but on my first day, a young man came to the group—call him Jake—who had been in prison only two years. He was talking fast about getting back to the streets and to his girl. He was sure he would not make the same mistakes again.

An older man—call him Bo—asked the younger if he might put a question. “Do you think you're more interested in pistols or your girlfriend?” Feeling the implied challenge, Jake showered denials at Bo. He really loved his girlfriend. He had the fast life under control. Bo waited, then spoke again. “I've been listening to you carefully, to what you actually talk about. You talk about pistols much more than your girlfriend. Unless you learn to know where your mind is at, you come right back in here as soon as you're out.”

He continued a little. “When I was 18, I used to go around to my uncle's house and I talked about guns. After a while, he found me the gun that I used to put myself in here. But now I think that if I had gone around to my uncle's talking about girls, he'd have found me a girl. So I listen to how someone spends his words.” That man Bo spent his words on inner freedom. I learned from him through a couple years of Fridays before he was released from Attica after twenty-eight years. His words showed where he was coming from. He was already coming from prison.

So was I. I was coming from one of those monkey-mind prisons we build around ourselves—prisons whose bars can slowly be turned to clay and crumble not so much through softening conditions, but through a process of inward attention to our thoughts, how they chain us to unending sorrows. In the first weeks of the Attica conversations, I found myself saying, “I'm a criminal.” How peculiarly light was that insight—not that the *state* could have any interest in my crimes, but that, seen from the inside, the sort of fears and needs that had moved me to mine differed not at all from those that had moved them to theirs. We are brothers from prison, I thought.

How much simpler it is to face the world when you think yourself no better than any, not those whom society dreads nor those it adores. So the question I have learned to ask in a hundred ways on both sides of the penitentiary wall, and the story to which my heart is tuned is, *How did it begin for you, this awaking from sleep, this coming from prison?* One way and another, the answer is from the night, like the psalmist's: “O LORD, God of my salvation, my soul is full of troubles. I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead whom you remember no more, You have made my companions shun me; I am shut in so that I cannot escape.”

That's how it usually begins. With a cry like Hagar's to heaven, like Job's demanding that God come down, stand in the witness box and accuse him—a cry not sanded smooth with efforts to remember that someone somewhere has it worse than me. This psalm we heard today is so strange. Laments in the Bible all follow a form. They surround the words of grief with due thanks for the good which God has done. Not this one. It is the only one with not one soft word. You can feel why they put it on the album, so to speak. Because it tells the truth and does not hold back. Because if, like Job's friends, you get jammed up with the idea that religion means you must pray right and live right if you want God to

do right by you, then you are stuck with a pretense, a false face, a hollow self. This is a problem for most churches. In his little book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that church is just about the only place where it is not safe to be a sinner. This psalm invites the church to a different kind of place. Better to go all the way down. And: if you would be a true companion to those who are lost or losing what they love, better to let them whom you love take their train to the last stop. For the singer of this psalm is in prison and she can't come from prison until the song is sung.

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand

I am tired, I am weak, I am lone.

Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light

Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.

Home. A.k.a. "from prison." A funny thing about the men I have known in prison—that includes the group I meet with in Sing Sing each week now: they are more free than the average person on the street; more prepared through the desire of their heart to step back and see their monkey-mind building the walls of need and fear that hedge us about with unhappy thoughts and obsessive complaints. They know what not all know, that we're all doing time; that we can all come from prison.

How? We have spoken of the necessary steps down, but which go up? And how do you find them and when are you ready? Of course there is no set answer for these questions. But let two things be said. First, this is the business of the church—to help men and women) in every stage of life to go down deeper, that they might rise higher. Yes, it is on the pattern of crucifixion and resurrection. No, it's never a once-and-for-all thing, over and done, saved. It is a pattern of dark and light, and dark again, and more light. We teach the pattern through story and song, through prayer and preaching, by the sick bed and by the Sunday, so that when the night jumps you in an alley, as it will, your whole body will be ready to respond like his who has shown his wounds to you. This is what we are here for. Every act of the church, from a mission to Cuba to the gift of food to the hungry to the blessing of children to the lifting of song in these vessels to the lifting of the bread and the cup is for training on the upward way, to go deeper first, that we may come from prison.

The other thing to say is this. However the grace of freedom from our prison comes to us, dappled in darkness and light, it comes through a transformation of time, how we experience it. Almost all our suffering— instant physical pain excepted—is suffered in time. Consider. Our ordinary thought is that happiness lies . . . over there, not here. Often you can think of a moment in the past when happiness was lost—a point A when you went off the path you wanted your feet on. If you feel responsible—a damaging word spoken, say—point A was the beginning of feeling guilt and shame. If you feel wronged—a limb or loved one destroyed by a drunk—point A is where hopelessness landed. Either way, to suffer like the psalmist suffers is to look as if from a shadowed trail up to the sunlit path you think your life should be on—and worse, to believe that you cannot and will not be at peace until this cold, rock-bedeviled trail you are on again meets up with that high path you should be on, some Point C. This is misery, never to be at Point B, present to the path you are on, but continually thinking of the path you wish for, ashamed or angry about the past gone awry, afraid the right future will never come. This is prison. Every awful thing we ever did or will do comes to our hand or lips or thoughts out of our despair in our deadly experience of time.

Not much can be said of what you must do to come from prison, but this much is always so: When you are free—sometimes it comes only seven seconds at a time, but it's freedom—you see that there never was any other path than this, the one you are on. And there never is any other time than this time, the one you are in. And if your tongue is trained by your Lord Jesus—there are other beautiful tongues— then for you, it is as if God comes down in Christ from the infinite and inaccessible to give you life anew on your path. Time is transformed from a long evil line to the eternal, now. You come

from prison.

If we are blessed like this and glad, it is still “too light a thing,” in Isaiah’s words—a benefit of no great consequence—unless we become a blessing for all the families of the earth. For a church that has experienced the bursting of its walls into an abundant sea of diversity, the blessing of coming from prison can come as confidence to find a train going further than your last stop. Who is not here yet? you may ask. The answer is, those who in utter darkness are crying out Psalm 88, whether they know it or not. Where are the formerly incarcerated? Where are the severely disabled? Where are the mentally ill? Where are the sex-workers this morning? Where are the poorest of the poor? In prisons, of course, like you and me. But not in the churches, mostly. Why is that? Do they horrify us? They will, if we are still doing time in a line, trying to get away from evil, trying to get up to our sunlit path. These will then remind us of our broken wills, our feeble bodies, our uncertain minds, our poor spirits and our wall will not come down. But every church that would have God come down and transform time must have the adventure of discovering its next diversity breaking down its dividing wall. For this is how we grow, as Rainer Maria Rilke put it, “by being defeated, decisively, by constantly greater beings.” This is how we come to God: from prison.

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