

Reflection & Prayertime: Wonder-Working Wood (by Rev. Cindy Weber, adapted)

October 12, 2020

Exodus 15:22-27: Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" He cried out to God; and God showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There God made for them a statute and an ordinance and there God put them to the test. God said, "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in my sight, and give heed to my commandments and keep all my statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the God who heals you." Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water.

Three days without water. You can imagine their relief, their joy upon finding the spring. You can also probably imagine their disbelief, their despair upon finding the water too bitter to even drink. The mothers trying in vain to comfort their little ones, the elders dropping to the ground from total exhaustion. Have you ever been to Marah, to that place of bitter waters, to that place of less than you expected, to that place where you expected something else, something different, something better, something more than what you got? I would guess that for a lot of us, we're in that place of bitter waters right now.

Fred Craddock, in the book, *Craddock Stories*, says, *I am going to say a word. The moment I say the word I want you to see a face, to recall a face and a name, someone who comes to your mind when I say the word. Are you ready? The word is 'bitter.' Bitter. Do you see a face? I see a face. I see the face of a farmer in western Oklahoma, riding a mortgaged tractor, burning gasoline purchased on credit, moving across rented land, rearranging the dust. Bitter. So you see a face? I see the face of a woman forty-seven years old. She sits out on a hillside, drawn and confused under a green canopy furnished by the mortuary. She is banked on all sides by flowers sprinkled with cards: 'You have our condolences.' Bitter. Do you see a face? I see the face of a man who runs a small grocery store. His father ran the store in that neighborhood for twenty years, and he is now in his twelfth year there. The grocery doesn't make much profit, but it keeps the family together. It's a business. There are no customers in the store now, and the grocer stands in the doorway with his apron rolled up around his waist, looking across the street where workers are completing a supermarket. Bitter. see the face of a young couple. They seem to be about nineteen. They are standing in the airport terminal, holding hands so tightly that their knuckles are white. She's pregnant; he's dressed in*

military green. They are not talking, just standing and looking at each other. The loudspeaker comes on: "Flight 392 now loading at gate 222, yellow, concourse, all aboard for San Francisco." He slowly moves toward the gate; she stands there alone. Bitter.

Sometimes our faces are bitter, too. As we think of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. As we remain in our home for one more day. As we deal with the illness of our loved ones. As we...we can fill in the blank for ourselves, or for a loved one, unfortunately. And we can thus imagine the faces of the people of Israel, dry and dusty and disbelieving, gathered there around the spring of Marah, each dusty face as bitter as the water itself..

This morning's story was written down a long time later when the people of Israel were in exile. As are we, in some ways. Not in exile from our homes, unfortunately, but in physical exile from our church community, from our co-workers, from our family members, in exile from the ability to be able to make plans. Many of those in exile had given up hope, and this was a story that reminded them that God is faithful to God's people: *For I am the God who heals you*, said God. *The wilderness through which Israel traverses*, says Walter Brueggemann, *comes to be a metaphor for a zone of life not properly ordered and without the usual, reliable support systems*. Sounds like our zone of life, too.

So what happens? Well, God tells Moses to throw a piece of wood into the bitter water, and he does, and it makes the water sweet. No longer bitter, no longer even just plain-tasting water, but sweet. God tells Moses to throw in a piece of *wonder-working wood*, as John Newton called it. This story, says Brueggemann, *asserts both Israel's vulnerability and utter dependence, and God's fidelity in giving what is needed for life. God's people are shown here in their deep precariousness...which makes me think of a quote of Barbara Brown Taylor that I have often repeated: We're all just one phone call in the middle of the night from everything going awry. God's people are shown here in their deep precariousness; God is shown in utter, sovereign fidelity*. As he wrote a letter to his friends at Philippi, the Apostle Paul was in deep precariousness as well, was in exile as well. He had been imprisoned, and I'd imagine he had every reason and then some to be bitter, and yet he wrote these remarkable words:

Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me....(Philippians 4:11-13).

Paul's contentedness wasn't based on outward circumstances, but rather on his inner

life with Christ.

There's something I want to note about this passage, and that is that Paul says, *I have learned to be content*. Some people seem to just flat out have the gift of contentment, the gift of joy. But that's not true for most of us. And it wasn't true for the Apostle Paul, either, who doesn't come off in the scriptures like Little Merry Sunshine. But he learned to be content. He worked at it. Even though he was in jail, he managed to write this letter to his friends full of thanksgiving and joy.

How do we learn to be content, to find sweetness in the bitter places of our lives? Well, it takes practice. And there are all kinds of ways to think about this, but I'd like to suggest five practices that might help us to sweeten the waters, so to speak. Five types of wonder-working wood.

The first is thanksgiving. Ken Sehested talks about bright sadness. About how even though in all of this and that, we say, *nevertheless*. That doesn't come naturally to all of us, and so we have to practice it. Next time you're stuck in traffic and you're tense and uptight, practice giving thanks. Look around, find something that's beautiful. Maybe it's a tree by the side of the road, a cloud in the sky above, a truck driver waving you over. Give thanks. Just try it, practice it. Throw in the wonder-wood of thanksgiving.

The second practice may seem opposite to the first, but I think it's just as crucial, and that's the wonder-wood of lamentation. When you're just flat out not able to give thanks, then lament instead. It doesn't help to mask our pain, to act like everything's okay. We lament. We share our feelings in the presence of God, we say exactly how we feel to God. It doesn't bother God to hear us complain. God had Moses stir the waters of Marah after Moses cried out to the Lord. The Psalmists often lamented, and almost every time, in every psalm of lamentation but one, they were able to come back around to, "but I will praise the Lord." Bitterness made sweet through the practice of lamentation. Throw in the wonder-wood of lamentation.

The third wonder-working wood is forgiveness. Frederick Buechner describes what it's like for us when we refuse to forgive: *To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.*

There are those of us who feel such anger and frustration toward some of the leaders of our nation, and state, and city. And that anger and frustration is based on our love for justice, and that's not a bad thing. But we don't want that bitterness to define us, do we? We don't want to, as Buechner says, wolf down ourselves due to that bitterness, to be the skeleton at the feast due to that bitterness, do we? We don't want that

bitterness to define us.

Joan Chittister (The Gift of Years) describes it like this: *Bitterness, once it sinks like sand in the soul, skews our balance for years to come. It is always there, scratching and digging and burning the heart out of us...Only we can free ourselves from the burden of bitterness...Only we can begin to look for the exceptions that make this a forgivable offense rather than immutable malevolence....Are we really sure that it was an intentional as we have painted it?...Is there nothing that explains it, that mitigates it, that makes it understandable? "Is there anyone we wouldn't love," poet Mary Lou Kownacki writes, "if we only knew their story?"...Forgiveness puts life back together again.*

The fourth wonder-working wood that I want to mention is freedom, and by that, I'm talking about inner-freedom. There are, of course, all kinds of things that we are not free to make happen, for as Walter Brueggemann said, our lives are *deeply precarious*. But one of the things I've shared the most is the story of how one of Nelson Mandela's prison mates on Robben Island, where they were isolated and humiliated and forced to do hard labor, how he would begin every day saying, "I will not let this diminish me." Talk about cause for bitterness, and yet every morning this man made the choice anew that the *circumstances* of his life would not determine who he was or how would live. Even during this pandemic, people are a whole lot more free, physically, than that man was. And yet, he experienced inner-freedom every day in a way that so many people never will. *I will not let this diminish me.*

The fifth wonder-working wood is dependency. Paul knew that he couldn't do it alone. I can do all things through Christ Jesus, who strengthens me. Paul depended upon God's presence and power. Just as the people of Israel knew that only God could sweeten those waters, Paul knew that only Christ could strengthen him in his weakness, bring contentment to him in his time of deepest need. We practice dependency by acknowledging our need for God. *I need thee, O, I need thee, every hour I need thee.* And by acknowledging our need for one another.

John Newton, who wrote the song, *Amazing Grace*, which all of us know, I think, also wrote these words: *But there's a wonder-working wood, I've heard believers say, Can make these bitter waters good, And take the curse away.* John Newton was a slave-trader until he became a follower of Jesus, and then he became an abolitionist, fighting slavery. I'd imagine that there was a lot of bitterness in him as he remembered his former days. But I also imagine that the curse was taken away from him at some point. By that wonder-working wood, by that same fidelity and grace that God shows us..."For I

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