

What's on the Other Side of the Curtain?
Hebrews 10:19-25; Psalm 16:5-11

Psalm 16:5-11

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.

I keep the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.

For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life.

In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Hebrews 10:19-25

¹⁹Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Prayer by John O'Donohue

The last two stanzas of John O'Donohue's prayer poem called A Morning Offering:

Creator God, Savior Christ, Life-giving Holy Spirit:

May my mind come alive today
To the invisible geography
That invites me to new frontiers,
To break the dead shell of yesterdays,
To risk being disturbed and changed.

May I have the courage today
To live the life that I would love,
To postpone my dream no longer
But do at last what I came here for
And waste my heart on fear no more.ⁱ

Amen.

The Sermon

Last week, in the middle of an all-day, 500-mile highway journey, I stopped into a familiar fast food chain just long enough to get a quick bite to go.

There was no one in line, so I went to place my order, and the server behind the counter, a woman of indeterminate age but older than Millennial, did not greet me with anything approaching warmth.

Actually, she didn't greet me at all.

I thought maybe she just didn't have a cheerful disposition, so I was careful to be a little extra polite, on my best behavior, and tried, in my own disposition, to offer a little bit of kindness and friendliness.

This did not work. As our perfunctory exchange went on, it wasn't in anything she said, it was in what she wasn't saying, and in an unchanging look that seemed to be somewhere between irritation and disgust.

I, on the other hand, am remarkably—I would say *phenomenally* charming. Just an absolute peach at all times.

And I was not ready to give up on my mission of bringing some cheer and positivity to this person's day. Maybe to their whole life.

It's what I do.

Bear in mind, though, if you will, a couple of things that I try to bear in mind in every encounter.

I remember reading, decades ago, an item in a local paper, the memory of which reminds me of that Miller Williams poem I quote all the time that goes,

Have compassion for everyone you meet,
even if they don't want it. What seems conceit,
bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign

of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
You do not know what wars are going on
down there where the spirit meets the bone.ⁱⁱ

The article I remember reading so long ago was a personal piece by a woman who had suffered the worst agony that a human being can endure: she had lost a child. One day, coming out of a grocery store, she made it to her car, loaded some of the groceries in, and something, or maybe nothing in particular, reminded her of that beautiful child.

And she stood there for who knows how long, unaware of the world around her, lost in thoughts that no one should have to bear.

Eventually, some random, well-meaning person approached, unperceived until they were this close to one another, and apparently seeing the look on the mother's heartbroken face said, unbidden: "Smile! It can't be *that* bad."

Yes, it can be, whether in the killing fields of Cambodia or a mild and sunny day in Pleasantville, Ohio.

And I also bear in mind the compelling writing of Linda Tirado, an average, unknown, working poor American who wrote an online comment that grew into an article, which was picked up by one news source, and then another, and then others, and was eventually read by more than six million people. She was then invited to expand it into a book, which is called *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Linda Tirado spelled something out for every one of us who ever goes into a store, a restaurant, a laundromat, an office, a movie theater, or any other place where employees, probably making minimum wage or less, interact with the public.

Her message was: you may be having a good day or a bad day, but the employee with whom you are interacting is almost always having a worse day.

They can tell when we think they ought to be grateful just to have a job.

They can tell when we think that because we're considering spending some money in their store, or leaving them a tip, that we are buying the right to treat them as people over whom we have some indiscriminate power—or, just simply as lesser people.

They can tell when we think they're poor enough that they need *us* a lot more than *we* need *them*,

and when we sense that here is somebody on whom I can take out my frustrations who won't be able to lash back without risking or losing the job that they obviously need.

Linda Tirado pointed out that that poor, bottom-of-the-totem-pole person we're interacting with is almost certainly having a worse day and a worse year and probably a worse life than we are.

It's most likely one of two or even three rotten, unfulfilling jobs that that person has to work, just to be able to almost-but-not-quite be able to afford housing, food, medicine, and day care for their kids, let alone things like dentistry and getting the car fixed.

And so, by the time we come in with our entitled, condescending attitude, they've already had to put up with a dozen, or fifty, or a hundred others before us. And: their life is not appreciably improved by bending over backward to endure the abusive verbal effects of someone else's bad day.

So, with all of that in mind, I was as pleasant and gracious as I could be without wanting to appear sarcastic. "Thank you so much for taking my order; what a breathtaking sacrifice on your part"—I didn't do that, but I was as polite, I thought, as a person could be.

So, I was perplexed when her disposition did not change or lighten up even the slightest.

I went to freshen up, and on the way there and back was met with more awkwardness and sudden silences from people who declined to make eye contact, and I started to think, “What a lovely town.”

When I came back out, the paper bag was sitting alone and abandoned on the counter, and might as well have had a sign on it that said, “Take your chicken sandwich and get out, and never come back.”

At some point, I realized that among 12-15 diners in the room, and two, three or four staff members, none were wearing masks, and I was.

I spent all my growing-up years visiting family in Kentucky; I know that part of the world and I like it.

But it began to dawn on me that (if every outlet from Fox News to MSNBC and all points in between are to be believed), in that part of the country, that mask I was wearing—to protect the life and health of those very people—was, to them, a political statement that was like a poke in both eyes.

It might as well be a flag that says, the public figure you adore and respect is an incompetent fool, and I’m not attacking him, I’m attacking you.

If that’s the offensive message that she *thought* she was reading in the simple, disposable mask I was wearing, then she was responding to me with all the civility that a human being could muster.

And in that context, in a way—not in every way, but in one sense—I am grateful to her for the enormous effort that she must have been having to put into her restraint.

It doesn't matter that it's science. It doesn't matter that my sole intent was entirely rooted in concern for the people in that beautiful outpost and the families they would go home to.

And, to be clear: knowing all of this, you would still not have been able to get me to take that mask off for one second, let alone walking in there without one on in the first place.

(By the way, and this is the most galling piece of the whole thing: best chicken sandwich I ever had in my life. Easily.)

We face, daily, invitations to disconnect, turn inward, and curse those we disagree with.

Is there hope of a different way of living in Christ?

—and not just to experience life a different way, in order to make it more enjoyable and pleasant for *us*, but to do at last what we came here for, and preach the good news in what we say, but also in the way that we live, and the way we interact, and the way we are?

A few days ago, a blog for a group called the Ministry Collaborative highlighted a verse from Isaiah 58:

“Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!”^{iv}

And they noted:

“Worn down
by months of uncertainty,
discord over masks and more,
planning decisions overturned by forces beyond our control,
and politics firmly upstream from faith formation,

there [seems to be] so little energy or will [right now] to
proclaim the hope of God like a trumpet.”^v

But, they said, Isaiah 58 continues:

The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.^{vi}

Is there hope of a different way of living in Christ?

And not just to experience life a different way to make it a more pleasant experience personally,

and not to establish ourselves as holier and therefore better than anybody else,

but to do at last what we came here for, and live our lives as an ongoing, world-nurturing proclamation of good news,

in what we say,
and the way we live,
and the ways we interact,
and the way we are?

—to repair the breach,
and rebuild the ruined and decaying streets
of our discourse and our disposition,
our social, economic and political justice,
our mercy, our kindness, our goodness,
our generosity
with our possessions and our privileges and our spirits?

Sometimes it feels like a great curtain is drawn, and the promise of the best that God has made us to be is still shrouded, hidden—but not absent. If we could only see what's on the other side of that curtain.

Mark, Matthew and Luke all testify, without explanation, that when Jesus was on the cross, either just before^{vii} or just after he drew his last breath, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”^{viii}

“My friends,” says the writer of what we call the Letter to the Hebrews, “since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary...by the new and living way that [Jesus] opened for us through the curtain...let us approach with a true heart in full assurance.”

It is now possible, as Tom Long has said, “truly to have access to the Holy Place, to be brought into communion with the merciful and generous God of all the Ages.”

Think about that.

“In the days of the former covenant,” he wrote, “the old high priest—and no one else—parted the curtain and entered into the tent called the ‘Holy of Holies.’ Under the new covenant..., all of God’s children enter into the Holy of Holies. The great high priest Jesus...has opened up a ‘new and living way’ into the true sanctuary and beckoned us to come in with him.”^{ix}

In our time,
 marked by dishearteningly easy manipulation
 into confusion and stupid divisiveness,
 but not yet utterly without hope,
 and in this world,
 broken and bleeding
 but not beyond repair and healing,

What would a different way of living look like—a way that built everyone up rather than puffed up some and tore down others?

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
 in the night also my heart instructs me.
 I keep the LORD always before me...
 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
 I have a goodly heritage.

For that reason, my heart is still glad, and my soul rejoices;
 For you do not give me up to Sheol,
 or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life.

May I have the courage today
 To live the life that I would love,
 To postpone my dream no longer
 But do at last what I came here for
 And waste my heart on fear no more.^x

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 November 14, 2021

ⁱ John O'Donohue, "A Morning Offering," in O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008)

ⁱⁱ Miller Williams, "Compassion," in Williams, *The Ways We Touch: Poems*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

ⁱⁱⁱ Linda Tirado, *Hand to Mouth*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2014.

^{iv} Isaiah 58:1

^v Elizabeth Lynn and Mark Ramsey, "Time for Trumpets!" *The Ministry Collaborative: Digging a Deeper Well* (email), November 11, 2021

^{vi} Isaiah 58:11-12

^{vii} Luke 23:45-46

^{viii} Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38

^{ix} Tom Long, *Hebrews (Interpretation Commentary)*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997; 104

^x O'Donohue, "Morning Offering"