

In The Trenches

Mary Zablocki, SFO

I just finished reading an article from Amnesty International aimed at raising my awareness of the deplorable conditions and terrible injustices suffered by our brothers and sisters in prisons around the world. Frankly, I always find this sort of awareness raising difficult because in achieving its purpose, it alerts me to my failure to alleviate the suffering and points out to my heart how deaf I am to the rattling of prison bars and the moaning of limp broken bodies on cold concrete floors all over the world.

This self-knowledge hurts me and the predictable response is immediate. Guilt, of course, and then guilt's old buddy defensiveness steps in followed by the bullying shove of helplessness, and finally the sneaking insidious snake of despair. All this in response to the request to write a simple letter.

All these dark, nasty, uninvited feelings swirl around and stymie me. I busy myself with my familiar tasks, and my old friends, contentment and self-satisfaction return and my self-esteem returns and I am soothed. Perhaps I send a few dollars to Amnesty International, or perhaps I have my charities all selected and my money distributed already.

As I straighten up the tabletop for supper, I pick up the article again. It feels hot in my hand, but I feel too guilty to throw it out, so I slip it into the magazine rack in the bathroom, as a token effort to enlighten the others in my household to the suffering of the rest of the world. Parked in there with the old National Geographics and gardening catalogs, its cries are muffled and with the bathroom door closed, I don't even remember it's there.

Am I being too hard on myself? Is this not the snake's venom clouding my thinking? Am I not looking straight into the shifty eyes of Satan as I listen to his silky voice tell me I am lousy at this Christian stuff and I might as well can this gospel living because I really don't have what it takes after all and if the truth be known I really don't care about all these people wanting something and I have more than enough troubles of my own and my time is precious and everybody wants a piece of me and I'm tired and I have carpal tunnel syndrome and irritable bowel and a sinus headache and on and on and on.

TIME OUT.

Before I vomit from the rich fare of the devil's table, I flee to the Master's house, where I know I will find the bread humble and the water sweet. I flee as millions have fled before, and as Jesus Himself fled in His moment of truth, as Francis fled, as Clare fled, as I have so many times myself.

Wrapped in His loving arms, I slump. A discouraged heap of failure, empty of all my false pride, stripped of my prosperous "good Christian" mask, I wait. And He

comes, as He always comes. He reaches to smooth my hair, He tips my chin up so I can look at His loving face, and He restores my appetite so I can enjoy His simple nourishment. And He invites me again to listen and to do. To listen and to do, to obey.

He tells me a story. It is my story, one that in my discouragement I had forgotten. It is a story of justice done where injustice seemed inevitable. It is a humble little justice, but my Master is pleased by it.

It begins, not in the big world, where eighty percent of the people are oppressed by their government, but in my small world, where I work. It takes place at the hospital, in my unit, on my shift. It happens to a man called Willie who cleans floors and washes toilets.

This night at work was like any other. I along with my colleagues did the nursing tasks, the doctors did their jobs, the operating room technician did hers, and presumably, Willie was mopping up somewhere in the back corridor. There was a commotion and Willie, who is about sixty years old, was being helped out of the unit by an aide and the O.R. tech.

He had fallen in the back hall and cut himself and was going to the Emergency Room for treatment. He never came back to finish the job, nor would he come back to Labor and Delivery where he had mopped and washed for twenty-five years. Willie was found to be under the influence of alcohol, and despite a sterling work performance and the absence of any direct contact with patients, was immediately dismissed.

He was given the opportunity to avail himself of the hospital's drug and alcohol rehab program, but was not to return to work. When we found out, it was not the Housekeeping Department who called us, but Willie's wife, calling, in tears to let us know. This caused a stir among the staff in Labor and Delivery, there was a lot of rallying of support, a lot of fondness expressed, some great Willie stories told, regretful posturing and head shaking.

Then came the challenge. I was the one wearing the Franciscan cross around my neck. Most of my friends knew I could write, some had seen my work, I had even helped some with grammar and editing of school papers. They turned to me and looked with expectation at me, as if to say, "Well, you talk the talk, are you going to walk the walk?"

It was my turn to be "individually...in the forefront in promoting justice by (my) testimony of (my) human life and (my) courageous initiatives." (Art. 15, SFO Rule) They wanted me to write a letter to Willie's supervisor to ask for the reinstatement of his job. They had heard me witness to the gospel, they had seen me witness by my Tau, and hopefully by my behavior. They looked to me as a sort of

unlikely leader to take the initiative. And so I did. I wrote a brief letter, expressing our regret that this incident had taken place and our confidence that with help, Willie could return to fulfil his job requirements. Everyone over the course of the next few days signed the letter and the head nurse sent it off.

Now this was not exactly a life threatening challenge. In fact it's almost embarrassing that the Lord pointed it out to me at all. In the face of real challenges, standing up to violent governments and challenging powerful tyrants at great personal risk, it amounts to almost nothing in the eyes of the world. But it was important enough for my Master to remind me about it when the devil tried so hard to make me forget. It was important enough to my Master because He does have work for me to do and as long as I came to Him for encouragement, He in His loving generosity gave it to me.

It is the small thing that pleased my Father, for which He wanted to say, "Well done good and faithful servant". It is the ordinary thing, the little thing, like Francis moving the worm out of the way of the wagon, or refusing to eat the chicken while the poor had none. It is the thing I can do. It is the place where I am. It is the obedience to the request, and the doing of the deed. It is the combination of all these things which puts another sturdy boulder in the rebuilding of God's church, and another block in the foundation of His kingdom on earth.

Willie was reinstated in another cleaning job in the hospital. His pension was secured and his wife stopped crying. He enrolled in the rehab program and maybe he will succeed in becoming sober. He doesn't really know me. I haven't "impacted on his life", or "raised his self-esteem". I simply did what I thought was right. I was in the right place at the right time and God used me.

I still work in the trenches. My little conversations with my Master continue to point out what he wants of me at work. I am learning as I go that it does not matter what we do "for a living" that counts in the building of the kingdom. We can do anything from checking boilers to firing shuttles into space and God our Lord and Master will find work for us to do for Him.

Don't listen to that old snake that says you're not good enough or important or powerful enough. Don't be dancing to that old tune that brings the tears of failure and discouragement.

When your alarm goes off in the morning, get up. When your feet hit the floor say thank you.

And when you punch that clock or answer that phone or start that car, know that God has His own job for you, and if you listen, He will tell you what it is. It just might be writing a letter.

After you brush your teeth the next time, look down into your magazine rack and see what's tucked in there. You might just find a message worth reading, a challenge worth meeting.

Hey, you never know.