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If only

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Jul. 8, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

Do you know the ?if only? lament? Many of us do, and chant it often. As we move through life, it becomes like background music or a theme song for the weary, the burdened and the worried: ?If only I were younger, I?d have more energy.? ?If only I were older, I could relax and retire.? ?If only I had more time, I?d be able to do so much.? ?If only others were more cooperative ...? ?If only they could see things my way ...? ?If only I were prettier, thinner, smarter, braver, stronger ...? ?If only I had a better job, a more understanding boss, nicer coworkers ...? ?If only I didn?t have arthritis, cancer, depression ...? ?If only others would understand me, appreciate me, welcome me, accept me as I am ...?

Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ezekiel, whose call to be God?s prophet is featured in today?s first reading, could have added a few verses to this lament. If only God would choose someone else ... if only the people would listen ... if only they would believe God has sent me to them. And Jesus, featured in today?s Marcan Gospel, could have sung a duet with Ezekiel. He had come home ?to his native place,? as Mark put it, and there, where people thought they knew him best, he received a less-than-cordial welcome.

William J. Bausch suggests that the resistance to Jesus was an all-too-human habit of putting others in a box (*Once Upon a Gospel*, Twenty-Third Publications, 2008). They thought they knew him; they decided who he was and were unwilling to consider any aspect of him that did not conform to their expectations. Perhaps we can imagine Jesus praying, ?If only you could see and believe the gift that God has given to you in me ...? But like Ezekiel, who championed God?s word six centuries before him, Jesus would continue to experience rejection and misunderstanding.

Through their faithful service, Ezekiel and Jesus were able to accept the struggles inherent in their efforts for God. In surrendering their ?if only? desires, they were able to find and rely on God, and in that reliance, they found the strength they needed to continue to do good and resist evil.

Paul, who shares something very personal about himself in today?s second reading, also had good reason to lend his voice to the ?if only? lament. He was burdened by something or someone he referred to as a ?thorn in the flesh.? We cannot know what this thorn was, at least not on this side of heaven, but we do know it was troubling enough for Paul to pray for relief from it. He prayed not just once but three times. By his own admission, he

begged God to remove what was so painful and troubling to him. But relief was not to be his. In his struggle, Paul learned to lean more heavily on God and on grace. He began to regard his thorn as an opportunity for greater intimacy with the Lord whose Gospel he preached. He even learned to boast of his weakness, for he saw it as a venue in which God could act freely, unencumbered by human pride or willfulness. Through the many sufferings he endured for the sake of the Gospel (Paul offers a list of them in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28), Paul cultivated contentment because he was sure that through it all, Christ was near, dwelling within him and sharing his yoke to ease his burdens.

When choruses of the ?if only? lament well up within us, we look to Ezekiel, Paul and Jesus and all those others whose faith grew deeper and whose love grew truer in the crucible of suffering. Sometimes we may be tempted to chant, ?If only the church were more in touch with the issues that plague our world ...? ?If only the hierarchy were less rigid ...? ?If only the rich would give their surplus to the poor ...? ?If only there were less ignorance and bigotry and more merciful love ...? ?If only there were more people to serve ...? When these desires arise, let us learn to surrender them to God, to rely more attentively on grace and to do the best we can with what we have. All the while, let us take care not to be the thorn that prompts others to beg God for relief.

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