

Faith in EXTREME Daily Life

In Thursday Theology #310 I invited you to send in a slice of life for us to “cross” as Ed and I had done with a slice of Faith Place life. One person took us up on that offer, Deaconess Patty Silva. Here’s her slice of life and my response. Robin Morgan

Okay, Robin and Ed—what about this? I’m the chaplain in a Christian-based, rural hospital that is financially threatened. In these times, this is no big surprise. For the most part, our small hospital serves the poor...many are very poor...in this agricultural area. They are migrant farmworkers and their families, the working poor with no insurance, the unemployed, the underemployed, the teenage moms and their babies. Times are hard here, even for the small farmers whose livelihood is based in raisin grapes, for which they can no longer get a fair price per the global markets. Vineyards are being uprooted and the land is being sold. Farmworkers, therefore, have few jobs this summer in the “home of the dancing raisins,” where it is only the raisins who are dancing these days. Our hospital takes all-comers, insurance or not. Our busy clinics are open at the crack of dawn and try to serve everyone before the doors close in the evening. Our emergency room subs for a doctor’s office, because doctors don’t take families without insurance.... standing room only from morning until night, full of people with little or no means to pay for the services. Federal and State law requirements are ever-tightening in all areas of the hospital, and we have dutifully adhered, emerging with flying

colors from all their surveys. The costs of these requirements in equipment and personnel have escalated many, many times over in the past few years. And, of course, the State of California is bankrupt, which has been a huge blow on every level of business, industry, and public service.

Our remaining staff (we've made all possible cuts in every area, including staffing) is an amazing conglomeration of people of diverse backgrounds, many faiths, and even within Christianity, represent a great diversity as well. Our mission statement includes the words "following in Jesus' footsteps" and it is basic to our daily work.

As the only chaplain, I'm becoming somewhat burned out. My office is where angry, fearful employees tend to gravitate. I'm the one who gets questions, such as, "Where is God now? Here we are, doing His work, taking short days and maybe soon short pay, in order to continue to serve his ill and broken, and the bureaucracy is going to cause us to shut down. Some of our sons and husbands are in Iraq where no expense is spared for weapons and equipment. The hospitals there are better off than ours."

Rural hospitals are closing all around us. There is no other hospital for 25 miles. When one has no automobile, and there is literally no longer viable public transportation between farm and city, trying to get 25 miles to a hospital is an intolerable situation.

The population here is approximately 67% Latino, 30% Anglo, and 3% Indian, Japanese, SE Asian and Middle Eastern. 89% of our children here qualify by federal standards for free lunches, though only a single digit portion takes advantage of those lunches, preferring to use discounted lunches instead. The economically solvent churchly folk around here (of all races) routinely blame the poor for their poverty.

So, the upshot is, I do devotions weekly at the hospital, and I need some help with this situation, as far as Gospel Hope and Promise are concerned. Our staff members see the gap between rich and poor every day. Their respective jobs are ministries in the greatest sense. The Christians among them are disciples par excellence. Those of other faiths are able to find common ground and pull together with the rest. Faith and practice in common mission are a reality in this place. I call it the "modern-day Church."

But, many are beginning to lose some ground as far as faith is concerned. I see a slippery slope ahead. They are wondering "why God is deserting His poor" as one was put it last Wednesday at a Christian-based meeting for prayer. And this is, again, a diverse group—Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, and mainstreamers, so the theologies vary wildly. HELP!

Dcs. Patricia Silva

Dear Patty,

As Ed and I read through your slice of life again together, we realized that there are two crossings to be made in your writing. The one is you, working and leading in this context; the other is the people with whom you minister. Since I resonate with your position, I'm going to take a shot at offering some law and gospel thoughts to you and your predicament.

First, a few diagnostic observations. You say as chaplain your office is where angry, fearful employees tend to gravitate and that you are becoming burned out. "Where is God now?" is a question people ask as they continue to work sacrificially in

these circumstances. I can imagine your burn out is a combination of weariness in listening and offering compassionate feedback in what is a deteriorating situation, but also partly about the doubt that comes to your own heart and mind as you hear story after story "yeah, where is God now?" I'd venture to say that your trust in Christ gets overwhelmed by the fear, anger and doubt in the face of so much negative evidence. You may, I know I do at times, give ultimate authority to the bureaucracy that is so indifferent to the individuals caught in its grip. Who can possibly breakthrough such inexorable oppression? Of course we both know the end result of giving ultimate power to anyone/anything other than the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Idolatry is something our God does not take lightly.

On the prognostic side, I'd like to start with a story about a little girl who faced circumstances at least as challenging as yours and mine. She was one of the children in the early 60s who helped integrate southern schools. Every day she walked up the sidewalk of her elementary school flanked by National Guard officers who held at bay the white adults screaming obscenities at this little girl who was trying to get an education.

One day a doctor who worked across the street at a military base and had been watching these events occur, walked over to the school and spoke with the little girl's teacher. He told the teacher that if at any time it seemed like the little girl was succumbing to the stress of this extraordinary situation that she, the teacher, should call him and he'd come right over.

Not long afterwards the doctor did get a call from the teacher. She told him that the little girl was standing at the window talking to herself as she watched the angry white adults in the street below. The doctor hurried over to the school and when he

got to the little girl's classroom, he slowly and carefully walked up behind her. He heard what she was saying in her quiet little girl voice as she watched the angry mob outside, "Father forgive them because they don't know what they are doing."

Only someone who knew who she was, who knew WHOSE she was could utter such profound words in that horrific situation. She leaned on the reality and the hope of who God had made her in Christ Jesus. When our lives are surrounded by such dire circumstances, there is no other hope that can carry us through. Christ is already reigning in this place when I lean on Him, trust what He alone can do for me. He alone could bring me into a mercifully, loving relationship with my Creator and give me the strength and courage to follow Him out into the world. Ephesians 2:10 is my mantra, though I change the plural pronouns to singular to emphasize what God has done for me, "I am who God has made me, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God prepared beforehand to be my way of life."

I don't know enough about your circumstances to hazard a guess at what that Christ following looks like for you. Political action? Bureaucratic confrontation? Sharing your Christ centered strength so others can step out in new ways to claim their civil rights? That's between you and your Lord.

I do know that hope in Him is the only way to keep going when life around us seems so totally beyond our ability to change. I also know that following Him will pull us out of our comfort zones in ways we never before dreamed of. And yet I marvel at the combination of discomfort, deep peace and sense of purpose that I can carry at the same time.

I hope this helps.

Peace and Joy,
Robin Morgan