Blooming in the Noise and Whip of the Whirlwind

A Sermon by the Rev. Don Gall
First Congregational United Church of Christ
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SCRIPTURE
Matthew 25:34-40

Let us pray that the cries of all who suffer from hunger, cold, sickness and wear; from rejection, imprisonment, abuse, and despair; will rise up from the earth like a whirlwind indeed, and wring from our hearts the compassion we need, to open our arms in loving embrace, of all those who suffer in every place. Amen.

This past week, we heard Judge Brett Kavanaugh refer to the controversy swirling around his nomination to the Supreme Court as a “whirlwind” orchestrated by the Democrats in an effort to deny him a seat on the nation’s highest court. His choice of the “whirlwind” as a metaphor for these contentious times seemed quite appropriate, since whirlwinds are the product of turbulence and often leave chaos and destruction in their wake.

Gwendolyn Brooks, however, offers us a different perspective. In a poem titled “In the Mecca,” the poet challenges us to leave our comfort zones and actually “bloom in the noise and whip of the whirlwind!” That sounds like an oxymoron to me, since one rarely if ever sees anything blooming in the midst of a violent current of air whirling upward in a spiral motion and forward direction. Growing up in South Dakota, I saw a lot of whirlwinds, lifting dust, dirt and debris high into the air—but I never once saw anything blooming in them!

The whirlwind is a metaphor frequently found in the Hebrew scriptures. For all we know, Judge Kavanaugh may have been referencing Proverbs 1:27 when he equated the whirlwind with the chaos and confusion swirling around him. In I Kings, Elijah is said to have been taken up into heaven in the throes of a whirlwind. It was out of a whirlwind that God spoke to and confronted Job regarding his haughtiness. The prophet Habakkuk likened the whirlwind to God’s judgment upon the people, and Daniel equated it with the coming end of the age. There is no mention of whirlwinds in the New Testament—but there are numerous instances of people blooming when they’ve been caught up in Jesus’s way.

Getting too close to a whirlwind can be a frightening experience. Your best recourse, should you ever find yourself in the path of one, is to lie down flat and hug the earth. Perhaps it will pass over and leave you be. Or perhaps you will get sucked up into its clutches and carried away. But either way, it seems like an unlikely place in which anything would ever “bloom”—and yet, strangely enough, it can and does happen.

Anthony Ray Hinton was twenty-two years old when he was caught up in a whirlwind that almost killed him. He was arrested in Alabama in 1985 on a charge of first-degree murder. When he insisted on his innocence, the arresting officer told him it didn’t make any difference
whether he was innocent or guilty because he would be convicted either way. Why? For the simple fact that Hinton was black and he (the arresting officer) was white, as would be the prosecutor, the members of the jury, and the judge. And the officer was correct.

Even though Hinton had been twelve miles away from the scene of the crime, working at his job and clearly visible on surveillance video taken at the time, he was nevertheless tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by an all-white criminal justice system. He spent the next thirty years on death row. For the first fifteen years, he appealed his case through one lawyer after another to no avail, until finally a young attorney named Bryan Stevenson learned of his case and took it on. Over the next fifteen years, through the unrelenting efforts of Stevenson and his small staff, seeds got planted, hope sprung anew, and eventually their efforts came into full bloom when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the conviction for lack of evidence and the state of Alabama was forced to dismiss all charges and set Hinton free.

Like so many others before and after him, Hinton had been swept up into the whirlwind of a criminal justice system which today, after five successive decades of “get tough on crime” policies, has managed to imprison some 2.3 million of our citizens—more per capita than China, Russia and North Korea, most of whom are poor and people of color, with up to sixty-five percent having some form of untreated mental illness.

Today, twenty-five percent of our entire population is either in prison, out on parole, serving probation, or living with a criminal record. That’s one out of every four Americans. It kind of makes you wonder who you’re sitting next to or standing in line with, doesn’t it? Driven by a misguided drug policy, a decision to criminalize virtually all unwanted behaviors, and a blatant disregard for extenuating circumstances, America’s prisons have become warehouses for the poor, the mentally ill, and the drug addicted. Nowhere else can we find a larger trash heap of discarded humanity, created in our name, and funded with 1.4 billion of our tax dollars. And among those incarcerated are countless people, who like Ray Hinton, should never have been put there in the first place.

When these people are eventually released back into society, as most of them will be eventually, half of them will be immediately homeless, sixty-five percent will still be drug addicted, and virtually all will be unemployed and often considered un-employable because of their criminal record. Try imagining what that would be like by recalling the worst thing you ever did in your lifetime and then wearing a description of it on your forehead and across the front and back of your shirt or blouse so that no matter where you go or to whom you speak or with whom you apply for a job, “the worst thing you have ever done in your life” will announce your coming and your going. What do you think that would do for your self-esteem or your self-confidence or your prospects for a productive future? Is it any wonder that eighty to ninety percent of those with prior convictions end up going back to prison again?

Now don’t get me wrong: I’m not suggesting that there are not some who need to be removed from society for the sake of society, for clearly there are those whose transgressions are of such a nature that incarceration and separation from the public is not only justified but is necessary. But we can also say with a high degree of certainty that there are also many in our jails and prisons today for whom an alternative to incarceration would have been a much better option for both the individual and for society. But our penal system is not designed to redeem the fallen; it is only meant to punish them.
There is a story about Fiorello La Guardia, the legendary mayor of New York City, who, as a judge in 1935 was presiding over the police court. On one bitterly cold day a man was brought before him on charges of stealing a loaf of bread. The man explained that he was out of work, had no other income, and that his children were hungry. This was the only way he could feed them.

La Guardia explained that he had no choice as a judge but to uphold the law and sentenced him to a fine of ten dollars or ten days in jail. Then, reaching into his pocket he pulled out a ten dollar bill and said, “And here’s the money to pay your fine— which I now remit” He then tossed the ten-dollar bill into his hat, saying:

Furthermore, I’m going to fine everybody in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where people have to steal bread in order to feed their family. Mr. Baliff, collect the fines and give them to this defendant.”

The hat was passed and the man left the courtroom with forty-seven dollars and fifty cents, leaving all who were present to marvel at how justice had been served that day.

This story, whether apocryphal or not, expresses a bit of the importance that one person can have in the life of another. And it is based in the belief that we all have a responsibility to make a positive difference in the lives of others as we are able. That’s why, even though the problems with our criminal justice system have seemingly grown worse with each passing decade, efforts to change and improve conditions have also grown alongside of it.

One such effort was begun here in Lane County back in 1973 by a group of Catholic nuns and community activists. Instead of trying to change the system, they went to work at the other end of the spectrum and focused their attention on the people in prison by writing them letters, visiting them monthly, and picking them up from the bus station upon their release. Because so many are homeless when released, an organization called Sponsors was created, which in 1988 received funding to provide five beds. That modest beginning has since evolved into seven sites with 220 beds.

Today, at any given time, over a hundred men and women in Lane County are living in Sponsors-related housing until they are able to secure housing on their own. In addition, a Mentorship Program was begun pairing volunteer mentors with people released from prison in the belief that each of us is better than the worst thing we’ve ever done, that people can and do change, and that a strategic intervention at the appropriate moment can serve as a catalyst for positive change.

Studies have since indicated that the recidivism rate for people with a mentor has been reduced by over fifty percent and that many of these individuals have gone on to rebuild their lives and become productive citizens within their own communities, making Sponsors one of the most cost-effective crime prevention programs in the entire nation.

Upon his release, Ray Hinton spoke indirectly of the need for a ministry such as Sponsors when he said: “A lot of guys came here and died here without ever getting a visit. A lot of them never had a parent who loved them or a friend who really believed in them.” According to a written report, over 80 percent of inmates today do not receive visitors. And that’s a real shame, because it might have made the difference to know that there was at least one person out there who still cared about them and believed in the power and possibility of redemption.

Today, you and I can be that presence. You may never have thought of yourself as a participant in a ministry such as this, but you might be the difference between someone
returning to prison or finding a new direction in life; between thinking of him or herself as a miserable looser whom no one loves, or a child of God who is known, respected and cared for in spite of mistakes made. It is one of the many reasons that Mike Boothe, Jim Anderson, and I are currently serving as mentors in this program and that Jean Stover has chosen to devote herself full-time to the work of Sponsors.

I have no doubt that if someone incarcerated was a member of our own family we all would rush to their side, embrace them in love, and stand with them through thick and thin. But Jesus made it clear that every person is a member of our family, and that the way we treat the least one among us is the way we treat him and God. After all, when you stop to think of it, what slender sliver of chance or misguided behavior separates us from the incarcerated—or the holy from the unholy, the innocent from the guilty, the prisoner from the jailer?

Next week will begin a series of three 9 o’clock information sessions about this ministry and how we can become more directly involved with it. Both mentors and mentees will be present to share their stories of transformation and renewal, as will staff members from Sponsors to answer any and all questions. Even though many of you are already deeply involved in ministries with the hungry, the homeless, the lost and alone, I hope that others among you will choose to explore the mentorship program with Sponsors as another vital avenue of service and will choose to join us next Sunday at 9 AM.

I began this sermon by pointing out that the whirlwind was a metaphor frequently found in the Hebrew Scriptures but not in the New Testament. Instead, what we find in the Gospels and the writings of Paul are not references to whirlwinds but to examples of people who began blooming as they followed in the footsteps of Jesus. Mother Teresa reminded us that we cannot do great things with little love, but only little things with great love. It is up to each of us to decide when, where, and how we will do our thing, and how through it we will give expression to the greater love that is within us. So may we all be swept up into the noise and whip of God’s whirlwind, in whatever direction it blows, that we, too, may be found blooming in the service of others.

So let us go from here this morning determined to do what we can, with what we have, for whoever is in need. And if any of you have been led to believe that there is nothing you can do or that you have nothing to give to any of these ministries of love, then listen more closely, because as surely as you are sitting here this morning, somebody out there is calling your name.

Amen