

-Richard Stephens

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

My two brothers and I sometimes built rafts, using water-soaked logs, and other scrap lumber, and launched them on the great Mississippi River, from the banks of our farm which was located about 20 miles as the crow flies south of Hannibal, the home of Mark Twain. The river was the dominant force of nature in our lives, and it was full of risk and opportunity. We set out trot lines summer evenings, each with 40 or so hooks baited with small minnows or grasshoppers, hoping to catch the large catfish that prowled the deeps behind dikes (dams of rock and willows angling a hundred feet or so from shore) that had been built to direct the current from one bank to the other cutting a path in the river floor for stern-wheeler barge liners to follow thus avoiding the shallows. I was the motor rowing our 14 foot boat out on the mighty river, and my brother was the skilled guide placing our trot lines in just the right places as I rowed along the water-lines of the dikes, and raising the lines next morning in anticipation of our catch. It was after the catch, and finishing up chores, that we would sometimes launch our raft, board it, and try to guide its journey in the swirling currents.

The raft was where I learned my first practical lessons of faith. You see, when we boarded the rig, it would begin to sink under our weight. How far down would it go? was the compelling question! Would it hold us up on our journey down stream, or would it continue to sink. Most times the raft would sink taking us down to about knee deep in water where it would reach a point of buoyancy and then carry us along on our journey. Life on the raft on the Mississippi was always a balancing act of faith and works. Life on the Mississippi was also full of hope and sometimes despair, especially when the river was at flood stage. While we were on the raft we were relatively safe. But, let the raft tilt too much, due to an unseen, below surface, swirling eddy, and it would upend, throwing us in the river, putting us at risk, risk of drowning. On one occasion, my brother went under, did not surface immediately being caught in the eddy. Providentially, the current brought him around to the bank where his toe touched it and he levitated to the surface thus avoiding the tragedy we all lived with as Mississippi river rats.

Another dominant force in my family's life was the little Free Methodist Church in the village of Ashburn, Missouri, the first church in the Missouri Conference of about a dozen churches. My grandfather had built the church out of sawmill lumber (unfinished boards) to have a place of worship after he and his family had been "read out" (my father told me) of the Frankford Methodist Church where they had received the experience of "holiness," during a revival meeting. A secular history of Pike County (copyright 1883) reports the formation of this Free Methodist Church naming the members of my family who left the Frankford church and were the core of the new "Free" Methodist Church, before it became a Free Methodist Church. Three books were the standard sources used in this church: The Holy Bible with the Apocrypha, the 1910 Blue Back Hymnal, and the brown Worship in Song. The language of these books was not

the coin of the realm of the streets, hills, and river of Ashburn. But, the themes of these books often correlated almost perfectly with life on these streets, hills, and the river, especially my waywardness (my sin), the grace of God, God's mercy and forgiveness, and God's call to care for the little people—the poor, and hope. You see, Ashburn was a community in decline since the DuPont Powder Plant had closed at the beginning of the Great Depression. In a short span of time, Ashburn went from a metropolis of 640 people to 100 the year of my birth, 1932. Most of us who were left were either poor or the poorest of the poor. The church had declined from around 20 to 9, plus the so-called “three boys of Lewis and Cleo,” Gayle, Richard and Charles. And, we believed in hope, hope for betterment on earth, and ultimately hope for Heaven.

When Isaiah spoke in today's lesson (Isa. 43: 16 – 21) of God making a way for the Exiles in the “wilderness and rivers” we hoped that someday there would be a better way for us, for our families and neighbors. This better way came when plans for a big yellow school bus materialized to transport us to high school 20 miles away because there was only an 8 grade school in Ashburn. This better way came when Missouri Edison Company put in four street lights, for which everyone would pay 25 cents a month. Our community pride swelled. This better way came when the Missouri Conservation Commission hired us boys to plant thousands of trees on DuPont Powder Plant vacated land so the forest could grow again. And, this better way came when our school teacher/pastor D. L. Turnbough told my father about Central and Greenville Colleges, as places the founders of the Free Methodist Church had sponsored for people like us.

I must confess that I was very reluctant to take the 500 mile bus ride from Ashburn to Central College, and two days after arriving on campus, I found myself with my one suitcase out on the highway hitch hiking home. I was homesick to death! I called my father, and he heard my plea to return home and take over all the farming. He listened, and then made a deal with me: Son, stay one month, and if you don't like it, you can come home and take over the farm. Wow! But, those Central faculty and administrators was clever people. Next day, they had a softball game between the “old and new students,” and I heard my name called to play 3rd base for the new students. I did not know that anyone even knew I was there, and hearing my name called was special. Then, the first batter for the old students hit a hot grounder to third, to me, and I caught it and threw him out at first. Next thing I heard was applause and yells that seemed so loud that my Dad heard it all the way to Ashburn and chills ran up and down my spine. Who were these people anyway? I didn't know what to think, but it seemed that I was accepted, and somehow was supposed to be there at that far away little college with 30 of us in its freshman class. Soon, I came to know the faculty with such luminaries at Harriett Whiteman, professor of English, Howard Krober, industrial arts teacher and coach, Mendal Miller, president and brilliant preacher, Orville Walters, physician and teacher of my class in physiology, and others. Classmates became real people to me, including, you guessed it, one Arlene Greer, who became my life-long lover. And then, at one ordinary Wednesday night vespers, Coach Krober was the leader, and he simply walked out on the platform and without any singing, prayer, or the usual service he said, “I wonder if there is anyone here tonight who would like to do

business with God?" The next thing I knew I found myself walking down the aisle to the altar for prayer. I had so adjusted to campus by this time, that I thought I owned the campus, and acted too often like a smart aleck, especially in Professor Jean Thomas's psychology class. At that thought I was stopped in my praying with the clear message, undoubtedly from God's loving Spirit, impressing me to ask forgiveness from Professor Thomas. Someone ran to her apartment and she came and stood at the end of the altar and asked, "Richard what is it you want?" I confessed my waywardness to her, and asked her forgiveness which she matter of factly gave. It was then that I began a journey much as Paul spoke of with Christ that continues to this day. Talk about Isaiah's hope being realized! And, I still had Greenville College waiting for me.

At Greenville, my journey toward maturity in Christ continued under the careful teaching and modeling of such people as Prof. Wilson King, teaching the Life of Christ, Coach John Strahl, Homer Cunningham and Al Quall, historians and teachers of philosophy of education, and others whose names read like a Hall of Fame: Tenney, Kinney, Dare, Long, Ayers, Miller, Woods, Marston, and more. These modeled and taught discipline without legalism, piety without flinty expressions on one's face, and concern for each person no matter their heritage. They believed that a church that carried the marker for the poor in its name, the word Free, meaning open to all but especially the poor, could sponsor a high quality college especially for the poor, whose alumni could and would excel in their accomplishments and service to and through the church. But, they held that its colleges must be real colleges "equal to the best secular schools of the country," is the way the bishops put it in their Pastoral Letters. Reflecting this view, President Long of Greenville said in his inaugural address in 1936: "It is inconceivable in a really Christian college anyone should keep a closed mind, whether in the realm of religion, philosophy, or science. This necessarily means there will continually be a seeking after truth. There must be a fundamental loyalty to truth regardless of where it leads." This reminds me of Paul's statement, that he destroyed arguments in the cause of following Christ even if it meant withstanding Peter to his face over religious dogma.

In the lesson from John today, we see Jesus showing deep love for the little people, and courage to return to the home of Simon the leper and there to see Lazarus, Martha and Mary again. He knew that in just a few days the power brokers would come after him, but he had time for ordinary people. He had captured their hearts, and they loved him. Maybe Mary's expression of love and honor was too much, as Judas and all the other disciples thought. But, Jesus accepted her worship, and added that given the condition of the world it will produce people who are poor, and in so doing reminded the disciples that the poor must always be a major focus of followers of God. Along with worship comes the high call of God for love and justice which was first announced in the Law which Jesus referenced in his comment, "the poor you have with you always": "Give liberally and ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore, command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" (Deut. 15: 10 – 11)

Dear friends, the rafts we ride on the swirling rivers in today's world, the rafts we build of home, school, church, college, and others may at times seem to be frail and insignificant. And, in

themselves they are, but in the economy of God's grace God often takes the foolish things and confounds the wise, and God's presence in them makes them rafts of hope. We need to do all we can to strengthen them, make them bear up under heavy loads, and insure that they are inclusive, from every tribe, nation, tongue and people, but especially the poor. B. T. Roberts, founding bishop of the Free Methodist Church, after proclaiming that the "provisions of the gospel are for all," he added the following question and answer: "But for whose benefit are special efforts to be put forth? Who must be particularly cared for? Jesus settles this question . . . 'the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up . . . AND THE POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM . . . In this respect," concluded Roberts, "the Church must follow in the footsteps of Jesus." As we learn from Mary, we must declare our values, our worths, our worship, and from Jesus' response that love and justice must be the outflow of our worship especially to the poor. He said on another occasion, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, but not do the things I command you." In our day, why do you sing praise songs, and hymns, but then fail to follow-up with doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with your neighbor. This call of the Church to worship and social justice is not a "perversion of the Gospel" as one political self-aggrandizer called it on his TV show, and it is difficult to understand how such an one gets the hearing he apparently does from such a large following of Christian people. No, I agree with the view that the call of Jesus to both worship and service includes grasping the hand of a drowning person in the river. But it also includes going back upstream to find out by whom, and why, people keep being pushed into the river, and there do the hard work of removing structural sin. This is worship and social justice.

Dear friends, I can never forget that the tiny Ashburn church of 9 people provided this teaching of worship and work by containing within its walls three books, the Bible with the Apocrypha, the Blue Back Hymnal, and the Worship in Song; and, it maintained a connection to two colleges that have helped countless thousands of us who were not born into riches to heed this message and to hear the call of that Hope of which Isaiah spoke and which Jesus makes real as he and his Church continues God's work of redeeming the whole of creation.

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 43:16 – 21; Ps. 126; Philippians 3:4b – 14; John 12:1 – 8