

“Confessing the Blues”

Job 23: 1-9 & 16-17

Psalm 22:1-15

Mark 10:17-31 (The Parable of the Rich Young Man)

Children’s sermon: *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, by Judith Viorst.

Back in the 1920s, there was a young man who lived at the Dockery Plantation in the Mississippi Delta who didn’t want to pick cotton. Robert was bitter toward his creator, blaming God for the death of his beloved wife and unborn child. He got an old guitar and wanted to make money playing the blues...but he really wasn’t any good. His friend Willie Brown tried to teach him what he knew, but it just didn’t take. Other musicians told him to get lost, and since he could get arrested for loitering without a job, and he had no earthly ties, he disappeared.

When he came back to the plantation a few months later he was different. From then on, the young bluesman played his instrument with an unearthly style, his fingers dancing over the strings. His music was startling—and the musicians who’d laughed at him before, now wanted to learn from him.

No one could get Robert to talk, but his friend Willie Brown told the story: Robert had learned from an ancient former slave, that if he waited at the crossroads of Highway 61 and Highway 49 near Clarksdale on a moonless night, then the devil himself, in the form of a large field hand, would come and offer to tune his guitar for him. Then he would be a bluesman, guaranteed a life of easy money, women and fame. Sunday, December 19th, 1926, was such a night, and Robert went to that crossroads. At midnight a large field hand did appear from out of the cotton field, took Robert’s guitar and tuned it, played a few licks, and gave it back to Robert. He got what he bargained for, but he paid with his eternal soul—sealed with a drop of blood drawn by a broken bottleneck.

A week later the levees along the Mississippi River were breached by floodwaters, and the infamous Mississippi Flood of 1927 had begun. Robert Johnson went on to cut 24 of the greatest Delta Blues 78-rpm recordings ever made, but within a dozen years he was dead—poisoned by a jealous husband. An eyewitness claims to have seen him on all fours, howling at the full moon the Saturday night that he died.

Early this morning, when you knocked upon my door (2x)

I said hello Satan, I believe it’s time to go.

Robert Johnson, “Me and the Devil Blues”

The blues are as much a part of Black musical experience as are the spirituals, but the spirituals get all the attention in church. Of course the spirituals address God directly while the blues do not. But there’s more to it than that. As my story indicates, the blues are associated with the devil and the devilry of Saturday night. Spirituals are associated with the divine and the divinity of Sunday morning.

Langston Hughes tells how he was at a black church reading some poems from his first book, *The Weary Blues*, about hard luck and trouble. As he was reading he noticed a deacon approach the pulpit with a note that he placed on the rostrum. Hughes did not stop to open the note until he had finished the reading and acknowledged the cordial applause of the audience. Then he looked at the note, which read: "Do not read any more blues in my pulpit." And it was signed by the minister. The minister might well have called the blues "devil music."

The annals of Black music contain several examples of bluesmen who came to see the "error of their ways," and vowed never to play the blues again as they turned to performing gospel music in the church. Thomas A. Dorsey, famed gospel composer, had once been "Georgia Tom" and "Barrelhouse Tom" until his wife and son died in childbirth in 1932 when he wrote "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," and rarely looked back. After all, what are the subjects of the blues but sex, drugs, alcohol, violence, irresponsibility, betrayal and revenge? Far from proper topics for respectable discourse.

But it is my contention that the blues should be a part of the church experience just as the spirituals are. They should be a part of the church experience because they are a part of the human experience. The spirituals tell us about an ultimate triumph in the by-and-by, but the blues tell us about daily perseverance, dogged persistence, in the here-and-now. Both of these need to be acknowledged and honored.

But what about the sex and alcohol and betrayal? Doesn't singing about something promote it? Or does it just acknowledge it as part of human experience? Doesn't writing about something legitimize it? Or does it draw it from the dark corners of our minds to air it out and come to terms with it?

When people complain about the blues promoting alcohol, I think of Noah getting drunk and exposing himself to his sons (Gen 9:21). When people bemoan the sex and violence of the blues, I refer them to David and his seduction of Bathsheba and then murder of her husband Uriah (2 Sam 11). When upstanding church members ask about the bluesmen who abandon their families, I remind them of how Abraham sent Hagar and his own son Ishmael into the desert to die (Gen 21: 9-16). Are we to tear these pages out of our Bibles? Or is it time to admit that the Bible doesn't limit itself to respectable discourse?

When folks criticize the betrayal of the blues, I point out Rebecca, who shows her son Jacob how to steal the first-born blessing from his older brother Esau (Gen 27: 8-17). Nothing could be sadder than the blues lament of Esau to his father Isaac: "Haven't you saved a blessing for me?...Do you have only one blessing, father? Bless me too, father!" And Isaac coldly replies: "Now there is nothing that I can do for you, son!" (Gen 27: 36-38).

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.... (3x)
A long way from home (2x)

Tell me if Job doesn't sound like a bluesman (23: 8-9, 16-17): "I have searched in the East, but God is not there; I have not found him when I searched in the West. God has been at work in the North and the South, but still I have not seen

him....Almighty God has destroyed my courage. It is God, not the dark, that makes me afraid—even though the darkness has made me blind.”

*Sometimes I feel like freedom is near....
But it's so far away*

All of our natural inclinations revolt against the loneliness and the brokenness that the blues display. We are much better than that, so we turn away in disgust. Listen again to the Psalmist (22: 6-7, 14-15): “I am no longer a man; I am a worm, despised and scorned by everyone! All who see me make fun of me; they stick out their tongues and shake their heads....My strength is gone, gone like water spilled on the ground. All my bones are out of joint; my heart is like melted wax. My throat is as dry as dust, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You have left me for dead in the dust.” Who is not repulsed by this lowly state?

*Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone....
A long way from home*

Who would want to sit next to this man in the pews? Believe me, you can usually tell when a homeless person comes into the room, because you can smell something.

We'd much rather sit next to the rich upstanding young man in Mark's gospel (10: 20) who had kept the commandments all his life. Wouldn't we? He looks good, smells fine, and he knows when to stand up, when to sit down, and which hymnal to use, for goodness sake.

Yet Jesus tells us how far he is from the Kingdom of God. Where is the Kingdom of God then? Apparently it is found among those people who are not bound by wealth, not driven by a code of conduct.

It sometimes appears that what Jesus calls us to is a life of service—in Mark the rich young man is to give all that he has to the poor; and in Matthew (25: 33-40) the righteous sheep are those who fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and visited the prisoner. And these are certainly worthy things to do. But Jesus' message is not that simple.

Consider what Jesus told his twelve disciples to do. Here's what the Gospel of Mark says (6: 7-13):

He called the twelve disciples together and sent them out two by two. He gave them authority over the evil spirits and ordered them, 'Don't take anything with you on the trip except a walking stick—no bread, no beggar's bag, no money in your pockets. Wear sandals, but don't carry an extra shirt.' He also told them, 'Wherever you are welcomed, stay in the same house until you leave that place. If you come to a town where people do not welcome you or will not listen to you, leave it and shake the dust off your feet.'

Was the command to set up a soup kitchen? Was it to open a homeless shelter? Organize a free clinic? Surprisingly...No. Essentially he ordered them to be

homeless and in need of a soup kitchen. The disciples would be a sort of free clinic on foot. And when you think about it, this is much like Jesus' own way of life—expecting and accepting the hospitality of others. As Jesus explained to the Pharisees (2: 17): “I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts.”

The rich young man was told to sell all he had and give it to the poor. But is that what would bring him to the Kingdom of God? No, actually. For admirable as that would be, he also had to come and follow Jesus—as a homeless person.

The story in Mark is directly preceded by Jesus blessing the children, where he says (10: 15): “I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” We like to think how glorious it is to behold the innocence and the playfulness of children, but the most remarkable thing about children is their sheer dependence—they are fully in need of the hospitality of others...as are Jesus, and the disciples, and all of those who would enter the Kingdom of God.

So while the blues sing of being broke and broken-hearted, troubled in mind and body, with a hellhound on my trail, those are the conditions that bring us closest to the Kingdom of God. The blues are the songs of the people of God, brought to acknowledge, not conceal, their broken state. Those upstanding ones of us, determined to conceal our broken state, still have some ways to go in the eyes of God.

We are taught that Jesus went willingly to the cross to triumphantly save us from our sins. But we are liable to have a white-washed view of the crucifixion. Consider those final hours:

One from among his closest friends agrees to betray Jesus for cold, hard cash (14: 10-11). When he goes out to pray (14: 33-41), “Distress and anguish came over him, and he said to [his friends] ‘The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me’.” When he asks them to stay with him for moral support they cannot even stay awake. As he is arrested (14:50) “all the disciples left him and ran away.” He is now completely alone before the authorities, who (14: 65) “began to spit on Jesus, and they blindfolded him and hit him. ‘Guess who hit you!’ they said. And the guards took him and slapped him.” His closest friend, Peter, denies three times even knowing him out of fear (14: 66-71). He is put in chains and whipped (15: 1, 15). The soldiers “beat him over the head with a stick, spat on him” and made fun of him (15: 19-20). Even the two others who were crucified with him “insulted him also” (15:32). He is finally and fully alone in the world. If you didn't know we were reading from the Bible you'd expect the final act to be a noose over the branch of a poplar tree. But the nails on the cross are no less brutal.

If you listen to Jesus on the cross, you hear a man in deepest anguish. Quoting the Psalmist, Jesus delivered what has to be the greatest blues line of all time (Ps 22: 1; Mark 15: 34):

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Then, Mark tells us, he gave a loud cry and breathed his last. This is not a cry of triumph; it is the cry of a man who has been lynched.

The blues are sung by solitary individuals out of the depth of their distress. We never feel more alone than when we are broken and brought low. That, too, is a holy state. Not one that we seek, but one we find ourselves in more than we care to say. Robert Johnson died in that state—broken and downhearted.

The blues is a low-down shakin' chill (2x)
You ain't never had 'em, hope you never will.

The blues is a achin' old heart disease (2x)
Like consumption, killin' me by degrees.

Robert Johnson, "Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil)"

But why sing about it? Why not just keep it to yourself? Because there is something healing in confessing your state out loud. In the church we talk about confessing your sins to God and one another. And there is much value in that. But there is also value in just talking about your woes—articulating them—even singing about them. And who knows—whether you think so or not, God might hear you. So confessing the blues is at least a step in the right direction.

But that's not all. If there is a cure for the blues, it is generally sought in companionship. Something to bring us out of that lonesome solitary state. It has to be admitted that in the blues the companionship sought for is generally a sort of—can I say it here? Well, unity with the opposite sex. And perhaps this is what makes the blues a touchy topic for the church. But it is interesting to see how that companionship with the opposite sex has, or is hoped to have, the very redeeming power of religion itself.

Listen to one of Robert Johnson's fellow bluesmen, Sonny Boy Williamson (for you connoisseurs of the blues, that's the "second" SBW, Rice Miller):

You talk about your woman, I wish you could see mine (2x)
Every time she starts to loving, she bring eyesight to the blind.

(Jesus gave sight to the blind in six stories, e.g., Mark 8: 22-26.)

Her daddy must been a millionaire, I can tell by the way she walk (2x)
Every time she start to loving, the deaf and dumb begin to talk.

(Jesus heals a deaf-mute four times, e.g., Mark 7: 31-35.)

I remember one Friday morning, we was lying down across the bed (2x)
Man in the next room a-dying, stopped dying and lift up his head.

Sonny Boy Williamson II, "Eyesight to the Blind"

(Jesus raises people from the dead twice, e.g., Mark 5: 35-43.)

How's that for the miraculous power of sexuality? The blues seek redemption from abandonment and loneliness, even if they don't look in the right places!

Things did not end well for Robert Johnson. While the story I told about the crossroads is apocryphal, and there is disagreement about exactly how he died, he did die a hard death. But he did not die as a man without hope.

*When you got a good friend that will stay right by your side (2x)
Give her all of your spare time, love and treat her right.*

Robert Johnson, "When You Got a Good Friend"

While he never turned to religion for consolation or redemption, he did persevere. And though he never was famous in his own time, through his music he uplifted and sustained countless fans over the decades since his death. How many of us have such a positive effect in the world?

What the blues does for us is legitimize defeat. And that is a necessary step toward the Kingdom of God. As Jesus concludes his comments about the rich young man (Mark 10: 31; but cf. Matthew 20: 16): "Many /Those/ who are now first will be last, and many /those/ who are now last will be first." Because when we are content and complacent, when we are rich and refined, when we are sated and serene...we still have some ways to go toward living by the grace of God.

But when we are broke and broken-hearted,
when we are troubled and tormented,
when we are harrowed and hampered,
when we are solitary and scorned,
when we are abused and afflicted,
when we are diseased and distressed,
when we are weary and worried,
when we are fragile and forlorn...
...then we are ready to enter the Kingdom of God.

*Tempted and tried we're oft' made to wonder,
Why it should be thus, all the day long.
While there are others, living among us,
Never molested, though in the wrong.*

*Farther along we'll know all about it.
Farther along we'll understand why.
Cheer up my brother, live in the sunshine.
We'll understand it, all by and by.*

That last stanza is not the blues, but confessing the blues is a necessary preface to it.

James C. Klagge
Asbury United Methodist Church
October 21, 2012.