



Wayfaring

“Dues and Blues”

BY BILL NABERS

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”
— Romans 5:1-6

“I don’t ask for much, I only want your trust/And you know it don’t come easy/And this love of mine keeps growing all the time...Got to pay your dues if you wanna sing the blues.” Ringo Starr and George Harrison, “It Don’t Come Easy.”

Recently my friend and former neighbor at Bryce, Willene Morris, died. You may recall her walking her dog (first Scotty, then Sugar) all around Bryce while sometimes being followed by one of her cats.

If you lived in our neighborhood you quickly became aware that Willene was someone who knew what was going on—not in a nosy way but very caring of everyone and their pets. She was the consummate Southern lady; we shared some deep Southern roots. Willene was the first of three deaths in a short period of folks

that I knew. (My friends Eddie and Scott were the others.) Her death, like her life, touched a lot of people’s lives.

Willene had been a good neighbor. We checked on each other’s animals and property over the change of many seasons. Willene’s positive attitude was an inspiration; her attitude was not a “Pollyanna” approach. She had her share of trials and tribulations. The death of her husband, Fred, from cancer—followed by her own bout with cancer, and the death of her beloved dog Scotty—all happened within the span of a couple years. She really did not want to leave Bryce but her health became an issue after Fred’s death.

If those hardships were not enough, she was also concerned about the trend in our community and nation to spout venom at one another instead of love and understanding. Despite all this and more she quickly bounced back from down times and kept forging ahead.

Willene’s faith kept her going. It was a faith rooted both in the reality of our fallen world and the hope infused in this world by the God who loves it (and us) so much. Her ability to be grounded in reality without losing hope and curiosity about life is the chief characteristic I will take with me. She was sharp. Both she and Fred asked me some tough questions and we had some deep discussions about the Bible and the Christian faith. I’m not sure I could always give her answers but I enjoyed the discussions. And her faith was not just cerebral but lived out in the way she cared for all of us in our neighborhood. I tried to convey to her several times just what an impact she had on our lives but I’m not sure she ever realized it.

Very quickly the two quotes from the beginning of this column began to crystallize in my thinking. I recalled those words of Paul from his letter to Church in Rome. He was trying to explain how God’s grace was more powerful than any human trait. The love of God had gotten him through rejection (of his own people and the Gentiles he witnessed to), beatings by the authorities, physical ailments, shipwreck and imprisonment, just to name a few of his trials.

Despite all that he would pick himself back up and go about proclaiming God’s love in hope, not fear, to a broken world. You need go no further than his name to realize the ironic humor of God and the task set before him. His given name was Saul which means rugged or handsome. Jesus gave him the nickname Paul which means little or small. (Not unlike his “odd couple” partner in the faith, Peter, who had a similar name change.)

Roughly two thousand years later and two other wise men named Ringo and George put it even more succinctly. “You gotta pay your dues if you wanna sing the blues/And you know it don’t come easy.”

Both George and Ringo were once part of four wise men called the Beatles who caught lightning in a bottle through their music as they helped guide a generation through a turbulent time. (Their bandmates, Paul and John, wrote some excellent songs about life as well. By the way, all we know the original wise men brought three kinds of gifts but that doesn’t really tell us how many wise men there were. Maybe four? Five?) “It Don’t Come Easy” was written after the breakup of the Beatles and the straining of deep friendships. It speaks of hope grounded in reality of life. Willene embodied that type of faith for me.

I think this has implications for all of us. It is easy to have faith when things are going your way. When you are “winning” you can feel as if God is on your side. (That is actually an ancient heresy we are still struggling with.) But if you persevere when things aren’t going your way? Now that will catch people’s attention. That response is not normal in our “what have you done for me lately” world. But our faith is not in what we can do but what God, through the Son and the power of the Spirit, can do through us. Willene helped model that for me.

Think back to those first disciples. In St. John 6:66-68 it is written, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Not exactly a ringing endorsement from Peter but enough for God. Or on that first Easter Sunday the eleven that were left locked themselves in a room out of abject fear. Yet they still gathered and that was enough for Jesus to have the opportunity to reveal himself to them. He then empowered those frozen-in-fear disciples to go out and change the world.

Many years ago in another column I wrote that the blues are the most Lutheran music there is, even though we don’t sing any in our worship (that is a story for another column). This brought much mirth to then-publisher, Peggy Boston. She had grown up in the Midwest and had a few experiences with “Luderans”. I will admit our failing to appreciate good music and practice what we preach. This is true even though we are the Church of Luther, Bach, Handel, Pachelbel, Hougen Yavislakier, and Lost and Found. (You

may have to look some of them up on YouTube.) The blues are about facing reality and keeping on. I think that is at the core of the Christian faith that I am trying to commend to myself and you.

So, “you gotta pay your dues, if you want to sing the blues.” Never lose trust in God’s power to see us through. God’s love for us, and the world he created, has not diminished. Thank you to Willene for her friendship and embodying that realistic but hopeful faith. May we all seek to sing the blues and keep the faith. We will be amazed what God can do through that little bit of a window of perseverance through his love and power.

“I don’t ask for much, I only want your trust/And you know it don’t come easy/And this love of mine keeps growing all the time...Got to pay your dues if you wanna sing the blues.” Amen.