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## **God's Therapy**

Mark 9:49

Christine Bartholomew has written of the theological lessons that she has learned through her struggle with the disease of lupus. She expresses it in these words:

One year after a successful series of chemo treatments, I still carry a dormant disease within my body. I've developed my own theology of sickness... Sometimes God uses our weaknesses as a way of refining us and making us able to walk a little closer with him. "For everyone will be salted with fire." Through the fire of pain and suffering we gain our depth, our flavor, our salt. Through my suffering I received the gift of God's undeniable presence. His Spirit walked into rooms, sat beside my bedside and held my hand.

My favorite wildflower is Queen Anne's lace. Its beautiful big white blossom has a small red dot in the center of it. The rare thing about this flower is that it cannot blossom unless it is first infested with bugs. It cannot become all that the Lord created it to be unless the bugs come and coerce the blossom to open. We are like Queen Anne's lace. We cannot become all that God has planned for us to be if we do not allow the "bugs" in our life to help us blossom.

God is constantly refining us with fire, whether that fire be conflict, persecution or sacrifice. These events can change us and draw us closer to God... We may walk into heaven suffering, limp, and lame, but we will walk tall.<sup>1</sup>

This issue is addressed in the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. There the disciples come to Jesus with questions about their identity as followers of Jesus. They want to know if it is appropriate for outsiders to contribute to their ministry. People they do not know are doing acts of ministry in the name of Jesus. They are concerned that it is dangerous to have unauthorized people going around speaking on Jesus' behalf. Jesus tells them that the boundaries that concern them do not matter.

Mark uses this incident to get at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Along with Jesus' answer to this question Mark brings in additional material in which Jesus speaks to the question of the identity of the disciple. But the thread that runs through all of this material is that the disciple is one who recognizes that God is active in our lives drawing us ever closer to his presence. God is working with our weakness, refining us and salting us with fire. The disciple is one who understands that through this process a new identity is blossoming.

At the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of this church in 1885, James C. Conkling gave an address on the history of the congregation. My favorite section of his address is his description of John B. Watson. Watson was born into a Scots-Irish family in South Carolina in 1800. When he was eight his family moved to Illinois and then across the Mississippi River to a farm near Louisiana, Missouri.<sup>2</sup> He arrived in Springfield as a young man in 1827. He was a charter member of First Presbyterian Church when it was formed in 1828. After hearing Albert Hale preach at an 1834 revival he became one of the founding members of this church the following year. In 1836 he became the fifth elder ordained by the

congregation.<sup>3</sup> Conkling described Watson as a strong anti-slavery man and a faithful member of the choir.

In 1849 Watson led a group of men from Springfield who wanted to prospect for gold in California. Conkling interviewed one of the members of that group who described their journey in these words:

On the 10<sup>th</sup> day of April, after having passed the outskirts of civilization an association was formed for mutual protection. It consisted of 27 men from Ohio, 11 from Indiana, and 31 men from Illinois. A constitution was unanimously adopted including the following article: 'Members shall not be allowed to quarrel among themselves, nor shall any member be allowed to drink intoxicating liquor; gamble, use improper language, labor on the Sabbath or do anything on Sunday, that would be a violation of the laws of the states of Ohio or Indiana or Illinois.

After pointing out that John Watson was elected the superintendent of the group Conkling includes this firsthand description of the journey:

We kept the Sabbath as a day of rest from a sense of Christian duty; but experience proved we could travel more miles, than those who travelled seven days. Many companies passed our encampment, only to be repassed sometime during the week; and at the end of every week, figures proved that we had passed more companies than had passed us on the preceding Sabbath...<sup>4</sup>

The account of the journey goes on to describe the conversion and baptism of one of the members of the group. When they arrived in California they ended their journey in true Presbyterian fashion. They passed a resolution thanking John B. Watson for leading them safely across the prairies and over the Rocky Mountains. This was not the typical experience of men rushing for the gold fields in 1849. It sounds a lot more like a Presbyterian men's retreat, which of course it was.

The ironic tragedy of Watson's life is that after surviving the dangers of his three year journey he died the day after he arrived home in Springfield when he was exposed to an epidemic of cholera which was sweeping this city. He held the hands of his mother-in-law and two daughters and prayed with them as they passed from this life. A few hours later he died from the same disease. It is clear that John Watson understood the challenges and hardships of his life as the process of being salted with fire. He experienced this church as an instrument of God's therapy enabling him to blossom as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Kent Winters Hazelton has described the process by which this refining takes place. He was officiating at the funeral service for the wife of a retired minister who had served for many years in the church where the service was held. The grieving minister and his deceased wife had both grown up in the Armenian Orthodox tradition before becoming Presbyterians as young adults. He wanted to have the Armenian Lord's Prayer sung by the congregation at his wife's service. But in the end he decided that the music was far too difficult for the congregation to sing. Instead it would be played on the organ.

When the piece was played during the service something unexpected happened. About halfway through it a faint sound of humming could be heard coming from the back of the church. The humming began to spread until it was picked up by the entire congregation.<sup>5</sup> In that moment the spiritual identity of that congregation blossomed. A family going through the fire of grief was embraced by the salt of a compassionate community. That same salt is at work in our midst. We, too, can be instruments of God's therapy.

## Endnotes

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1. Christine Bartholomew, *Christian Century*, September 22, 2009, page 20.
2. Cyrus Watson, *Autobiography of Cyrus Watson*, page 305.
3. Second Presbyterian Church records.
4. Address of James C. Conkling, *Second Presbyterian Church Historical Data*, Volume I, C.L. Conkling, pages 23-27.
5. This story was told in a service of worship I attended at First Presbyterian Church of Lawrence, Kansas on August 23, 2009.