

Now can we sing?

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [March 23, 2010](#) issue

About a month after my mother died, as I was conscientiously prolonging my grief, I was offended by the impertinence of an undeniably glorious sunny day, and in February too. What sort of God would rub such beauty in my sorrow-contorted face? It made me wonder which was more real—my ugly loss or the gift of a beautiful day?

Each blue Monday, though it seems more often, I get a dispatch from an agency of my denomination informing me of the terrible things that have happened in the past week. This agency seems to believe that those of us who live in the hinterland don't read newspapers or watch TV. It is good enough to send to us clueless ones a weekly catalog of how bad things are around the world: earthquakes, plagues, murder, starvation and mayhem. The God this church agency believes in is always behaving badly in some part of the world or another.

But isn't this the business of the church? We are those who, because of our faith, have a heightened sensitivity to evil's work in the world and a moral obligation to point to the pain that the rest of the world can't see. Less morally attuned people may stroll past the suffering, but we're Christians; we stop and stare, take up an offering, make an appeal, collect blankets and construct health kits, sighing as we do our bit to alleviate some of the misery. That life may not actually be rotten in my part of the world today only increases my guilt for my occasional lapses into joy. How dare I sing when others suffer?

At large church meetings there is always someone who seems to derive perverse delight from pointing to the tragedies that the rest of us more calloused ones missed. At one such meeting, we'd been working for three days—struggling with depleted resources and disappointed by the less-than-adequate outpouring of aid for various world problems. We were preparing to end the meeting and head home when a dreadfully earnest participant grabbed the microphone.

"I think it sad," she said, "that in three days there hasn't been mention of the horrible tragedy of landmines in Iraq." A sigh arose in the room. "Children are being maimed. Many of these landmines were purchased from the United States, put there

through our tax dollars.”

An already deflated meeting rolled over and died. Look at us. We were so busy eradicating killer diseases, curing malaria, raising \$3 million to solve AIDS, funding the pensions of suffering African pastors and sending water purification systems to Haiti that we missed the one good work that could have certified us as a church that really, really cares.

The church works hard to bring to our attention areas of human heartache that the rest of the self-obsessed and insensitive world misses. (While you are listing problems to be addressed by a caring church, add self-obsession and insensitivity to the list.) If children are not starving here, they are hungry elsewhere. You mailed a million in aid to Haiti? So what? That’s only a fraction of what the country really needs. Besides, your compassion for Haiti doesn’t make up for your apparent lack of concern for Bangladesh. Any show of joy or expression of praise amid such pain is incredibly thick-skinned of you.

But is this what God wants? If God had desired our constant mournful earnestness and concern, why did God make a gloriously effusive world filled with peacocks and humming birds and bright February days to mess with our grieving? If we look at the world from this angle, it’s almost as if God wants us to be happy.

On two mission trips to Haiti with undergrads, there was widespread agreement that the most disarming thing about the country was the laughter of the children, along with their raucous singing. How dare they sing when their life expectancy is so horribly short? Was their laughter an escapist respite from the unmitigated tragedy of their lives, or a smart rebuke to our assumption that their lives were trapped in tragedy?

As darkness fell upon Port-au-Prince after the earth heaved that January night, people danced in the streets and sang hymns. On CNN, Anderson Cooper was incredulous.

The insufferably earnest releases from our church agency presume that the morally attuned among us, the truly courageous, are the ones with the guts to admit how bad things are in this terribly flawed, fallen world.

Recently a Palestinian activist was hooted off the stage after he’d given a speech and had the temerity to suggest that there were signs of hope in the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. Apparently the true Christians among us are the unalloyed pessimists who are always prepared to burst the balloon of the goofily optimistic and the stupidly happy.

But those singing-through-their-tears Haitians make me wonder: a truly theological analysis suggests that we may be meant by God for music, destined for joy. Maybe our fitful good deeds are not the end of the story. The church's relief bulletins rarely include that theology along with its lists of sins and disasters. This is what you get when anthropology overtakes Christology—it's always Good Friday. What's dead stays that way.

In his poem "A Brief for the Defense," Jack Gilbert writes that "to make injustice the only measure of our attention is to pray as the devil." What is the devil's due? What if the truth about God is that God is good? What if the ultimate destiny of this world is in God's hands rather than left up to us and our brief spurts of moral activity? What theological justification do we have for making "injustice the only measure of our attention"? Perhaps those singing Haitian women know more than we do.

Speaking to a group of German pastors in the 1930s, Karl Barth spoke for over an hour and never once mentioned Hitler. When asked why he had failed to comment on the key current issue, Barth replied that he had the joyful task of proclaiming Jesus Christ, so why would he waste his audience's time with mention of a "nothing"? This was the sort of behavior that Reinhold Niebuhr (with his "realism") despised in Barth. But I ask you: was Barth being unrealistic in his nonchalance or was he working with a different reality? As the poet declares, to allow injustice to jerk us around and command our full attention is "to pray as the devil."

Which story about the world is true? From one angle Luke's Gospel tells a tale of suffering and woe. Here were oppressed Jews who had hoped that Jesus might be the redemption of Israel, but once again, as so often happens to oppressed people, they were sadly disappointed. In an orgy of violence, Caesar won again. Anybody who knows anything about history has heard this story before. Satan rules.

Though this story requires no art or imagination—as we say, it is the officially sanctioned, conventional story that permeates every epoch of history, and a story that continues to hold us captive. In the face of death and mayhem, the best we can muster, if we have an ounce of moral seriousness about us, is compassionate busyness. Since God isn't going to help with the heavy lifting, it's up to us. No

wonder I look out at my congregation on Sunday and note that the best and the most concerned of them are the most fatigued.

But what if the grieving women who came to the tomb on Easter morning are right? What if Friday isn't the end of the story? What if God is rewriting human tragedy into surprising comedy? What if Jesus told the truth when he declared, toward the opening of his ministry, that he was turning today's tears into tomorrow's laughter. Thus Luke's good news ends not with the disciples' grim determination to right what's wrong with the world, but with their turning toward Jerusalem, the scene of the greatest of tragedies, "with great joy."

This world is full of death. Open your eyes and you will see the weeping all around. Human life can be, even for the undeservedly well fixed among us, one long series of funerals. Caesar sent thousands to the cross; still does.

As far as I can tell, there's only one thing we know that the world doesn't: we know another story. In the gloom, on the margins, there are women singing with Wesley and without earthly justification. Their only rationale is theological. They have learned the secret about God and can't help singing. The God who could have been sovereign chose rather to be love. Dare we risk defiant delight? Listen, in Port-au-Prince they are singing: *Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!*