

First Unitarian Church  
Sermon of March 24, 2013  
Rev. Gary Kowalski

### De Profundis

**“What else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell,” asked Martin Luther King Jr, “other than write long letters, think long thoughts, and pray long prayers?” The letter that he wrote to the clergymen of Birmingham on a spring day like this one fifty years ago would have been much shorter, he said, had he been seated at a comfortable desk. Scribbled out as it was on the margins of a newspaper and on scraps of writing paper smuggled into his cell by a sympathetic trustee, King’s letter was not only a longer but also a more powerful statement than any he might have written under less confining circumstances. It rang with an authenticity that came from the painful personal experience of being behind bars.**

**Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” which galvanized the conscience of the nation, is only one instance within a long history of prison correspondence. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela tells how he produced his own memoirs during the dead of night over the course of his twenty-seven years of incarceration, reducing 500 pages of manuscript to an almost microscopic shorthand that could then be ferreted out of Robben Island to his supporters in South Africa who were struggling to keep alive the dream of freedom. As a genre, such letters probably go back to the days of Paul and Silas. Spreading the gospel in the land of Macedonia, according to the Books of Acts, the two converted a young slave girl to their newfound Christian faith.**

**When the girl’s owners saw that their hope of gain had gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the city authorities in the main square; and bringing them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are causing a disturbance in our city ...” The mob joined in the attack; and the magistrates tore off the prisoners’ clothes and ordered them to be flogged. After giving them a severe beating they flung them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them under close guard.**

**In a sense, all of Paul’s epistles might be called prison letters. To the Corinthians, he claims to have been locked up more often than any of the other apostles. “Three times,” he says, “I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked, and for twenty-four hours I was adrift on the open sea. I have met dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my fellow-countrymen, dangers from foreigners, dangers in towns, dangers**

in the country.” Paul’s testimonial sounds very much like the later King: “I have been arrested five times and put in Alabama jails. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of a near-fatal stabbing.” What the two had in common, beyond lives of tribulation, was a shared belief that such suffering could itself be redemptive. The body’s agony and mind’s anguish could become avenues for the ascent of the spirit. This seems to me to be the primary proclamation Palm Sunday, and of the Passover season, when Jesus made his entry into Jerusalem. To reach the promised land, you have to first pass through the desert. There can be no resurrection without first wearing the crown of thorns.

It is difficult to speak of finding a purpose in suffering. There is so much hardship in the world that is undeserved; so much grief that seems beyond healing; so many daily inflictions of misery and injustice that theologians have invented a special term--theodicy--for the problem that it poses. How can we possibly believe in the goodness of creation when so much of our experience tells us that the universe is unfair? Each of us has our own share of trouble and misfortune, and each of us has to make meaning of it in our own way. But while the Christian answer is not for everyone, it does seem compelling for some. Yes, the innocent do suffer. And all of us are put on trial at some point, when our futures with all our hopes and dreams seem to swing in the balance, often for no good reason. But while we may or may not survive the ordeal, we cannot help being changed by it, often in ways that pass understanding.

The transforming power of suffering is a theme I find articulated eloquently in the prison writings of the nineteenth century author Oscar Wilde. The outlines of his story are probably well known. Born to an upper middle-class family in 1854, Wilde received the finest literary education that England could offer. From his tutors at Oxford, he not only absorbed the reigning aestheticism of the day, but became the chief proponent of “art for art’s sake,” famous among his admirers and notorious among detractors as a devotee of sensory delight. Wilde was satirized in the press as an embodiment of effeminacy and affectation and parodied on stage by Gilbert and Sullivan in their opera “Patience”:

If you’re anxious for to shine in the high aesthetic line as a  
man of culture rare,  
You must get up all the germs of the transcendental terms, and  
plant them everywhere.  
You must lie upon the daises and discourse in novel phrases of  
your complicated state of mind,  
The meaning doesn’t matter if its only idle chatter of a

transcendental kind.  
And everyone will say  
As you walk your mystic way:  
If this young man expresses himself in terms too deep for me,  
Why, what a very singularly deep young man this deep young man  
must be!

Wilde took such jibes good-naturedly, as he continued to dazzle readers with his own unique brand of wit and humor. Then, at the age of forty, at the peak of his career, he was charged and convicted of the crime of homosexuality, and sentenced to two years hard labor.

“The gods has given me almost everything,” Wilde would reflect during his prison term. “I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy ... There was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder.” During his stay in Newgate, and Pentonville, and Reading Gaol, he lost it all. His wife divorced him; he was declared morally unfit to see his own children; debts for legal fees forced him into bankruptcy, and his belongings were sold at auction. His home became a brick cubicle without plumbing or ventilation; a plank bed at night; days spent picking oakum or walking a mechanical treadmill. In the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, he described his fellow inmates--children, and the insane, housed with hardened criminals in the grimmest possible surroundings:

Each narrow cell in which we dwell  
Is a foul and dark latrine,  
And the fetid breath of living Death  
Chokes up each grated screen,  
And all, but Lust, is turned to dust  
In Humanity's machine.

But hardest to bear, for Wilde, were the public shame and humiliation that were heaped upon him as he stood manacled in the railway station awaiting his transfer to court to prison, the crowds jeering and spitting. One nameless person among the throng, Wilde later remembered, gravely and silently tipped his hat to the handcuffed prisoner in a gesture of respect. “Men have gone to heaven for smaller things than that,” Wilde wrote. “The memory of that little low silent act of Love has unsealed for me all the wells of pity, made the desert bloom like a rose, and brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken and great heart of the world.”

Thus Wilde began to learn more than he had ever known before, not only about the world's cruelty, but about its capacity for fellow-feeling and

compassion. “While for the first year of my imprisonment I did nothing else ... but wring my hands in impotent despair, and say ‘What an ending! What an appalling ending!’ now I try to say to myself, ‘What a beggining! What a wonderful beginning!’” In *De Profundis*, a long letter he wrote near the end of his sentence whose Latin title means “Out of the depths,” a reference to Psalm 130 Wilde was even able to affirm that there had been two important turning points in his life: when his father sent him to Oxford, and when society sent him to prison.

“I remember when I was at Oxford saying to one of my friends--as we were strolling round Magdalen’s narrow bird-haunted walks one morning in the June before I took my degree--that I wanted to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world, and that I was going out into the world with that passion in my soul. And so, indeed, I went out, and so I lived.”

“I don’t regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure,” he says. “I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does to the full ... I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb. But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting ... The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also.”

“I have lain in prison for nearly two years. Out of my nature has come wild despair; an abandonment to grief that was piteous even to look at: terrible and impotent rage: bitterness and scorn: anguish that wept aloud: misery that could find no voice: sorrow that was dumb. I have passed through every possible mood of suffering. Better than Wordsworth himself I know what Wordsworth meant when he said:

Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark  
And has the nature of infinity.

But while there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning. Now I find hidden away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all.

“I am completely penniless, and absolutely homeless. Yet there are worse things in the world than that. I am quite candid when I tell you that rather than go out from this prison with bitterness in my heart against ... the world I would gladly and readily beg my bread from door to door. If I got nothing at the house of the rich, I would get something at the house of the poor ... Of course I know that to ask for alms on the highway is not to be my lot, and that if ever I lie in the cool grass at night-time it will be to write sonnets to the Moon ... But were things

different: had I not a friend left in the world: were there not a single house open to me even in pity: had I to accept the wallet and ragged cloak of sheer penury: still as long as I remained free from all resentment, hardness, and scorn, I would be able to face life with much more calm and confidence than I would were my body in purple and fine linen, and the soul within it sick with hate.

“Reason does not help me,” Wilde confesses. “It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system. But, somehow, I have got to make both of these things just and right to me ...The plank-bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one’s fingertips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate ... the silence, the solitude, the shame---each and all of things I have to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul.

“The prison-system is absolutely and entirely wrong. I would give anything to be able to alter it when I get out. I intend to try. But there is nothing in the world so wrong but that the spirit of Humanity, which is the spirit of Love, the spirit of the Christ who is not in Churches, may make it, if not right, at least possible to be borne without too much bitterness of heart.

Wilde concludes, “If after I should go out a friend of mine gave a feast, and did not invite me to it, I shouldn’t mind a bit. I can be perfectly happy by myself. With freedom, books, flowers ... who could not be happy? Besides, feasts are not for me any more. I have given too many to care about them. That side of life is over for me, very fortunately I dare say. But if, after I go out, a friend of mine had a sorrow, and refused to allow me to share it, I should feel it most bitterly. If he shut the doors of the house of mourning against me I would come back again and again and beg to be admitted, so that I might share in what I was entitled to share in. If he thought me unworthy, unfit to weep with him, I should feel it as the most poignant humiliation, as the most terrible mode in which disgrace could be inflicted on me. But that could not be. I have a right to share in Sorrow, and he who can look at the loveliness of the world, and share its sorrow, and realise something of the wonder of both, is in immediate contact with divine things, and has got as near to God’s secret as anyone can get.”

Oscar Wilde lived for only three more years after his prison term ended. His time behind bars didn’t leave him a better man, he said, but it did make him a deeper one. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was his final literary work. It appeared in 1898 without the author’s name attached. Only his cell number, C.3.3. on the title

page, identified the man who had written it. Wilde considered it a direct assault on the barbarism of the British prison system, a cross between poetry and propaganda, but it sold as no verse in the British Isles had sold in years, and helped lead to the Prisons Act of 1898, which brought about sweeping reforms of the English penal code.

He told a friend before he died that he believed the entire world would one day read the words of *De Profundis* that he had written in prison, calling it “the message of my soul to the souls of men.” Along with the letters of Saint Paul, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and those of every other brave woman and man who has had to walk the *via dolorosa*, the road of sorrows, it stands as a testament to hope and pain, and how they intertwine, and as a reminder that even in a prison cell, one remains free to love.