

Bar Chime

Up until the early 2000s, the Western Province of the Community of St Mary, the oldest Episcopal order of nuns in the United States, ran a small retreat house just outside of Mukwonago called Mary's Margin. Some of us in this congregation have been there. To find it, you had to wind through a rambling maze of roads populated by homes with large front lawns and driveways housing big trucks and riding mowers, as well as a small menagerie of bikes, trikes, and hot wheels. Had one been able to see into the back yards, I'm sure each would have been populated with a sliding door leading out to a grill at the edge of a comfortable deck. And a bug zapper – the mosquitoes are vicious out there! Not exactly the setting where one would expect to discover a house of prayer and solitude.

Nonetheless, at the base of one of these curvy, hilly roads was a long driveway, and at the end of that was an unassuming, split-level home. Were it not for the large, hand-painted circular sign hanging above the garage doors which said Mary's Margin, a first-time visitor would have thought for sure she'd come to the wrong place. But once inside, it became a different world. From inside the house, even the outside seemed to be not where one had just come from.

No matter which window one looked out of, there wasn't another house in sight. North through the large bank of windows in the main room stretched farm fields, and beyond them, near the horizon lay the Vernon marsh. To the south and west acres of trees clothed the steep hills and valleys, into which the Sisters had painstakingly created a mile-long curving, winding, natural labyrinth, at whose center was an observation tower with a couple of deck chairs at the top, where one could sit and meditate. Nestled in a small hollow a short distance from the house were a couple of hermitages, and near those a fire pit, large vegetable gardens, fruit trees, and a sea of wildflowers and grasses everywhere there were not woods. With all of the hills and trees and winding paths, one could get lost there...not only in one's thoughts, but literally, lost. Once in the woods, even the house disappears.

Inside the house, there was a sense of peaceful quiet. The Sisters' daily lives were shaped by regular times of worship – corporate Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline – times of private prayer and meditation, as well as the regular daily household and business tasks. People who came for personal retreats were always invited to participate in worship, but it was not required. Sometimes youth groups would come for a work day, and spend it outside doing heavier jobs the Sisters found difficult, or occasionally church vestries or groups of clergy came for a planning day punctuated by quiet time outside or on their own. For visitors, worship was negotiable – but mealtimes were not. The Community of St. Mary's ministry was hospitality, and unless you were on a silent retreat in the hermitage, you were expected to be at the table.

But when you have groups of people scattered all over the property in a retreat setting, how do you get them all to come in for a meal? Some may be well out of earshot, and people on retreat can hardly be expected to keep checking their watches. Well, it seems the Sisters had thought of everything. Their solution to this problem was The Bar Chime. This little device is small enough to fit in the palm of your hand, but when struck with enough force, has a sound that just might rattle any loose fillings right out of your mouth. My goodness – I had never heard anything quite like it. So strong, so high, and (if you were the one who had to ring it) so *painful* – that any other thought in your head was instantly wiped right out by its piercing clarity.

Have you ever had a moment like that? A Bar Chime moment, when suddenly, just for an instant, all confusion falls away, and things are perfectly, unmistakably clear? An experience like that can be life-changing – a watershed moment, after which nothing is ever the same again. And often it is even more dramatic because it is so unexpected. One moment you're having a normal conversation, and the next – *boom* – somebody says or does something that just blows everything out of the water.

Like the Gospel today. Jesus and his disciples are having a regular conversation, as they have had so many times before. Jesus asks, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Since – unlike us – this wasn't an unfamiliar term to them, they gave the expected answer, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." So far, so good. But Jesus has also been known to refer to himself as the Son of Man. He does it back in Matthew 8 when a young man says, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go," and Jesus responds, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Knowing that he has referred to himself that way, it makes his next question less strange-sounding: "But who do you say that I am?" They could have said any of the obvious things: rabbi, teacher, healer, even prophet – all of which he was. But no. Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

(RING BAR CHIME)

And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” And from then on, nothing was the same. Jesus still had much to teach them, but the cat was out of the bag. Neither Peter nor the rest of the disciples yet knew what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah – next week we’ll hear just how wrongheaded Peter was about this – but the ball was now rolling toward Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the salvation of humanity throughout all time – past, present, and future, for with God, nothing is impossible.

Not all Bar Chime moments are so earth shattering. If they were, we’d be in pieces all the time, and could hardly function. We need time to process the big moments. Even the most positive, wonderful moments require some recovery time. We need that time to put into practice what we’ve learned from what has been revealed to us. Just like Peter. He didn’t realize the full import of his Bar Chime revelation when it happened. Perhaps he didn’t really get it until after the resurrection. And as we see in the Gospels, between that moment and the resurrection, Peter tripped and fell flat on his face quite a few times. As will we. Bar Chime moments teach us, but they don’t make us impervious to the less noble parts of our human nature. But they do move us in the right direction.

Quieter Bar Chime moments are still God moments, and they also shape our lives and our thinking in profound ways. And, for me, they also help me to answer God’s question, “Who do you say that I am?” What I mean by that is this: Who I think God is has a direct influence on how I treat myself and other people. If I think God is harsh and unforgiving, chances are that’s how I’ll behave, too. If I believe in God’s infinite wisdom and compassion, I’m going to want to be like that, too.

Recently I rediscovered a blog written by a young woman who went by the stage name Nightbirde. A deeply spiritual person, she wrote about her struggles and her faith as she faced her rapidly approaching death from a cancer that simply could not be contained or cured in her 31-year-old body. She wrote about the husband who left her during this time, of her loneliness, her pain, her gratitude, and her great love of God. A few months before she died she wrote something that brought me to my knees. She was writing her answer to that question God asks us all, “Who do you say that I am?” It resonates so deeply within me – it is definitely a Bar Chime moment in my life right now, and I have taken her words deeply to heart. Bear with me – I can rarely make it through a reading of it without tears. Her words:

“I haven’t come as far as I’d like, in understanding the things that have happened this year. But here’s one thing I do know: when it comes to pain, God isn’t often in the business of taking it away. Instead, he adds to it. He is more of a giver than a taker. He doesn’t take away my darkness, he adds light. He doesn’t spare me of thirst, he brings water. He doesn’t cure my loneliness, he comes near. So why do we believe that when we are in pain, it must mean God is far?

In the beginning, there was immense, immeasurable emptiness. But God was drawn to it like a fog to the sea. He stretched out His spirit over the void, and He stayed. If the stories I’ve heard of Him are true, surely He is nearest of all, to me. To us. You see, the Creator is still here, where He has always been, hovering over the emptiness.

I am still reeling, drenched in sorrow. I am still begging, bargaining, demanding, disappearing. And I guess that means I have all the more reason to say thank you, because God is drawing near to me.

Again.

Again.

Again.

No matter how many times He is sent away.”

– Jane Kirsten Marczewski (Nightbirde) 1990-2022

That is how Nightbirde answered the question in that moment. In this moment, today, this morning, who do you say that God is? And how are you going to live because of it?

Amen.