

“GOD AT WORK IN THE LIFE OF WILLARD SPLIVICH”

EACH WEEK THIS SUMMER, AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS CLASS ON “MODERN CRITIQUES OF THE CHURCH,” OUR SUMMER INTERN WOULD RECITE ONE OF THE VERSES FROM THIS PASSAGE IN I PETER.

“ALWAYS BE READY TO MAKE YOUR DEFENSE TO ANYONE WHO DEMANDS FROM YOU AN ACCOUNTING FOR THE HOPE THAT IS IN YOU...”

DAVID WOULD TELL US IT WAS ONE OF HIS FAVORITE BIBLE VERSES & THE BASIS FOR THE COURSE HE WAS LEADING.

I WOULD INCLUDE THE OPENING WORDS OF THE NEXT VERSE BECAUSE THEY ARE OF EQUAL IMPORTANCE:

“...YET DO SO WITH GENTLENESS & REVERENCE.”

THESE WORDS CARRY A DIFFERENT LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE FOR US THAN THEY DID FOR THOSE TO WHOM PETER WAS WRITING.

HIS READERS WERE ENDURING A TIME OF GREAT PERSECUTION & THEY WERE CONSTANTLY UNDER THE THREAT OF IMPRISONMENT OR EVEN DEATH IF THEIR CHRISTIAN CONVICTIONS WERE REVEALED.

A LETTER WRITTEN FROM ONE ROMAN OFFICIAL TO ANOTHER GIVES US SOME INSIGHT INTO THE SITUATION BELIEVERS FACED AT THE TIME.

IN HIS LETTER, THE ROMAN LEADER IS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT HE SHOULD DO WITH HIS INVESTIGATION OF CHRISTIANS.

HE WRITES:

“...IN THE CASE OF THOSE WHO WERE DENOUNCED TO ME AS CHRISTIANS, I HAVE OBSERVED THE FOLLOWING PROCEDURE. I INTERROGATED THESE AS TO WHETHER THEY WERE CHRISTIANS. THOSE WHO CONFESSED, I INTERROGATED A SECOND & A THIRD TIME, THREATENING THEM WITH PUNISHMENT. THOSE WHO PERSISTED, I ORDERED TO BE EXECUTED. FOR I HAD NO DOUBT THAT, WHATEVER THE NATURE OF THEIR CREED, STUBBORNNESS & INFLEXIBLE OBSTINANCY SURELY DESERVE TO BE PUNISHED.”

WE HAVE NO CONCEPT OF WHAT THAT’S LIKE, DO WE?

WE ALSO HAVE NO IDEA HOW WE WOULD RESPOND IF PLACED IN THAT SITUATION.

WE’RE OBVIOUSLY THANKFUL THAT WE’RE *NOT* FACED WITH SUCH A DECISION & YET IT IS PERHAPS TO OUR DETRIMENT.

IN HIS FASCINATING BOOK, THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS, C.S. LEWIS HAS SCREWTAPE – THE MASTER OF EVIL – OFFER THIS SUGGESTION TO HIS NEPHEW WORMWOOD – A JUNIOR DEVIL OF SORTS: *“DON’T MAKE IT HARD FOR CHRISTIANS. DON’T PERSECUTE THEM. MAKE IT EASY TO BE A CHRISTIAN - EVEN RESPECTABLE.”*

THAT’S THE ERA & THE SOCIETY IN WHICH WE LIVE, ISN’T IT?

BEING A CHRISTIAN IS EASY.

BEING A CHRISTIAN IS A RESPECTABLE THING TO BE.

AND YET, WE CAN SEE THAT CHANGING, CAN’T WE?

OURS HAS BEEN CLASSIFIED AS THE “POST-CHRISTIAN” ERA.

WHAT THAT MEANS IS THAT THE TIME IS PASSING WHEN IT WAS ASSUMED THAT EVERYONE WAS A CHRISTIAN & EVERYONE COULD BE FOUND IN CHURCH ON SUNDAY MORNING & THAT WAS HOW ONE GAINED RESPECTABILITY.

WE HAVE TO BE PREPARED TO LIVE IN THIS NEW AGE.

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS, WE’VE BEEN LOOKING AT THE MANNER IN WHICH GOD WAS AT WORK IN THE LIVES OF VARIOUS INDIVIDUALS THROUGHOUT HISTORY.

WE LOOKED AT THOSE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT, THOSE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THOSE IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH.

IN EACH CASE, THE INDIVIDUAL ON WHOM WE WERE FOCUSING WAS SOMEONE TO BE ADMIRER, SOMEONE WHO WAS A STRONG ROLE MODEL FOR THOSE OF US WHO WOULD SEEK TO BE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST.

I IMAGINE YOU HAD AT LEAST A GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF THOSE INDIVIDUALS BEFORE YOU HEARD A WORD OF THE SERMON.

THAT’S NOT THE CASE TODAY, IS IT?

WHO IN THE WORLD IS WILLARD SPLIVICH!?

YOU’RE QUITE CERTAIN HE’S NOT A BIBLE CHARACTER BECAUSE BIBLE CHARACTERS – FOR THE MOST PART – DON’T HAVE FIRST & LAST NAMES.

AND YOU’RE ALSO PRETTY SURE “WILLARD” ISN’T A BIBLICAL NAME.

BUT SINCE WE’VE MOVED INTO THE REALM OF HISTORICAL FIGURES IN THE PAST FEW WEEKS, PERHAPS HE’S A GREAT LEADER OF THE REFORMATION OR THE EARLY CHURCH IN AMERICA.

YOU MAY HAVE BEEN SO CURIOUS THAT YOU EVEN TRIED TO GOOGLE HIM.

JUST FOR FUN, I TRIED IT.

“NO MATCHES FOUND” WAS THE RESPONSE I RECEIVED FROM MY INQUIRY.

SO, THE QUESTION REMAINS.

WHO IN THE WORLD IS WILLARD SPLIVICH?

I WON’T KEEP YOU IN SUSPENSE.

HE’S NO ONE – AND HE’S EVERYONE.

WHEN I WAS IN COLLEGE, I WORKED WITH A GRAD STUDENT IN THE ATHLETIC TRAINING ROOM NAMED BUD TICE.

BUD ALWAYS THOUGHT HIS NAME WAS TOO SHORT & RATHER BORING.

SO WHENEVER HE’D GO TO AN ATHLETIC TRAINERS’ CONFERENCE, AND SOMEONE WOULD INTRODUCE THEMSELVES TO BUD, HE’D THRUST OUT HIS HAND & SAY, WITH GREAT AUTHORITY, “WILLARD SPLIVICH, GLAD TO MEET YOU.”

WE’D STAND BACK & SUPPRESS OUR LAUGHTER AS HE HAD TO REPEAT IT & THEN SPELL IT FOR HIS NEW FRIEND.

JUMP AHEAD SEVERAL YEARS TO A TIME WHEN I WAS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT A WAY TO HELP STUDENTS IN A CONFIRMATION CLASS PUT THEIR OWN PERSONAL FAITH INTO WORDS & ACTIONS BY BEING PRESENTED WITH SOMEONE WHO WAS ADAMANTLY OPPOSED TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.

ENTER WILLARD SPLIVICH.

A MADE-UP NAME & A MADE-UP PERSON.

HE ARRIVES, LOOKING A LOT LIKE THE PASTOR WHO HAS JUST STEPPED OUT OF THE ROOM TO TRY TO LOCATE HIS OLD FRIEND WHO WAS SUPPOSED TO MEET HIM AT THE CHURCH.

WILLARD TELLS THE STUDENTS HE WAS SUPPOSED TO MEET THE PASTOR WHO'S AN OLD FRIEND.

THAT MAY NOT BE EASY TO FOLLOW, BUT SUFFICE IT TO SAY THAT WILLARD THEN SITS DOWN WITH THE STUDENTS & TELLS THEM HOW RIDICULOUS IT IS TO BE A CHRISTIAN.

WILLARD IS A MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF SECULAR HUMANISTS.

HE PROVIDES THE STUDENTS WITH ALL THE REASONS WHY THEY SHOULD REJECT FAITH – IT'S FOOLISH, IT'S UNSCIENTIFIC, UNPROVABLE & AN INSULT TO ANY RATIONAL, INTELLIGENT PERSON.

THE STUDENTS' REACTION TO WILLARD IS ALWAYS FASCINATING.

HERE THEY ARE, AFTER NEARLY 3 MONTHS OF STUDY & LEARNING & FAITH EXPLORATION, TRYING TO DEFEND THEIR FAITH TO SOMEONE WHO HAS ALL THE ANSWERS.

AFTER 20-30 MINUTES, WILLARD LEAVES – OFF IN SEARCH OF THE PASTOR.

SHORTLY AFTER HIS DEPARTURE, THE PASTOR RETURNS & ASKS IF THE STUDENTS HAVE SEEN HIS FRIEND FOR WHOM HE'S BEEN WAITING.

A DE-BRIEFING SESSION FOLLOWS.

HOW DID THE STUDENTS FARE IN THEIR "DEFENSE OF THE FAITH?"

MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, THEY HAVE TRIED TO DEBATE WITH WILLARD.

THEY'VE ALLOWED THE CONVERSATION TO TURN INTO AN ARGUMENT.

IT NEVER WORKS – ESPECIALLY WITH SOMEONE LIKE WILLARD.

YOU CAN'T ARGUE SOMEONE INTO FAITH.

FAITH IS NOT AN INTELLECTUAL EXERCISE.

IT'S AN INTANGIBLE EXPERIENCE.

WE AREN'T ARMED WITH ARGUMENTS.

WE'RE EQUIPPED WITH STORIES – OUR OWN STORIES; OUR PERSONAL STORIES OF THE EXPERIENCES WE'VE HAD OF GOD AT WORK IN OUR LIVES.

AN ADDED DIMENSION TO WILLARD'S VISIT IS THAT, IN THE COURSE OF HIS VISIT WITH THE STUDENTS, HE REVEALS THE FACT HE'S A VERY TROUBLED PERSON.

HE'S JUST GONE THROUGH A PAINFUL DIVORCE.

HE'S LOST HIS JOB.

ONE OF HIS PARENTS RECENTLY DIED.

WILLARD JUST THROWS THESE LITTLE PIECES OF HIS LIFE INTO THE COURSE OF THE CONVERSATION.

HOW DO THE STUDENTS REACT TO THESE CRIES FOR HELP & COMPASSION?

MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, THEY COMPLETELY IGNORE THEM BECAUSE THEY'RE SO INTENT ON WINNING THEIR ARGUMENT WITH WILLARD & PROVING TO THEIR TEACHER THAT THEY'VE LEARNED THEIR LESSONS WELL & MASTERED THE BIBLE & UNDERSTAND ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS.

THERE ARE THOSE RARE OCCASIONS, HOWEVER, WHEN A STUDENT WILL BE STOPPED IN THEIR TRACKS BY WILLARD'S PROBLEMS & DO NOTHING BUT FOCUS THEIR ATTENTION ON THOSE DESPERATE NEEDS IN HIS LIFE.

WHEN THAT HAPPENS, WILLARD RESPONDS WITH SURPRISE & GENUINE APPRECIATION THAT THIS PERSON OF FAITH CARES FOR HIM.

ON THE ONE HAND, WILLARD SPLIVICH IS SOMEONE YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF & SOMEONE YOU'VE NEVER MET.

ON THE OTHER HAND, WILLARD IS SOMEONE YOU'VE ALWAYS KNOWN & SOMEONE NEW YOU MEET EVERY DAY.

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THE WILLARD SPLIVICHES IN *YOUR* LIFE?

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE AN ELISHA OR A DANIEL, A LYDIA OR A CORNELIUS.

GOD DOESN'T EXPECT YOU TO BE JONATHAN EDWARDS OR JOHN CALVIN.

GOD EXPECTS YOU TO BE YOU.

GOD DOESN'T EXPECT YOU TO HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS.

GOD DOESN'T EXPECT YOU TO BE PERFECT.

WHAT GOD CALLS YOU TO DO IS TO BE OPEN TO THE WAYS IN WHICH GOD IS SEEKING TO BE AT WORK IN YOUR LIFE.

GOD CALLS YOU TO BE OPEN TO THE WAYS IN WHICH YOU CAN EXPRESS THE LOVE, GRACE & COMPASSION OF CHRIST TO THOSE WHO ARE HURTING & STRUGGLING & DESPERATELY IN SEARCH OF ACCEPTANCE.

THE STORIES OF ELISHA & DANIEL ARE WONDERFUL STORIES OF FAITH AS ARE THOSE OF CORNELIUS & LYDIA.

THE STORIES OF JONATHAN EDWARDS & JOHN CALVIN ARE EXCITING EXAMPLES OF THE WAY IN WHICH GOD WORKS IN THE LIVES OF THE FAITHFUL.

YOUR STORY IS A WONDERFUL ONE AS WELL.

YOUR STORY IS AN EXCITING EXAMPLE OF GOD WORKING IN YOUR LIFE IN AN EXTRAORDINARY WAY.

AS PETER SAYS, "*ALWAYS BE READY TO MAKE YOUR DEFENSE TO ANYONE WHO DEMANDS FROM YOU AN ACCOUNTING FOR THE HOPE THAT IS IN YOU – YET DO SO WITH GENTLENESS & REVERENCE.*"

WHAT THE GREAT APOSTLE IS SAYING IS THAT YOU HAVE A STORY TO TELL – A STORY OF FAITH & HOPE – A STORY OF THE WONDROUS WAY IN WHICH GOD IS WORKING IN YOUR LIFE.

ALL GOD ASKS OF YOU IS TO *SHARE* THAT STORY WITH OTHERS. AMEN.

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