

The Road Less Traveled – January 18, 2019

My family was very blessed to take a vacation the first week in January. We don't usually travel after Christmas, but Melissa was recovering from surgery over the summer – when we usually travel – so we were pretty well stuck at home. We opted for a Caribbean cruise out of New Orleans, and the time away was great. We met a lot of nice people and were just able to unplug and relax for several days.

We made a lot of memories, but one of the most poignant of the trip was one that we didn't create, only witnessed. It was the first day of the cruise. In fact, we had not yet even left the port in New Orleans. We were roaming around, just getting the lay of the ship, and we ended up topside on the pool deck. There was a bandstand on one end of the pool, and a reggae band was playing. They were pretty good, so we stopped to listen. We met a man from Austin and his two traveling companions and were visiting with them. As we talked, the man pointed to an elderly woman standing off to the side. He told us he had just met her and that she had been a widow since 1957. She smiled and waved at us and said, "I never found anyone who could replace him!"

About that time, the band started playing a song – I can't even remember the name of it – and suddenly the woman closed her eyes and started swaying to the music and singing along.

My best guess is the song was one that she and her late husband shared. Maybe it was "their song," I don't know. But it obviously was special to her. That's when the story went from good to holy.

The band's singer, a young man whose name tag identified him as a member of the crew from Jamaica – saw the woman's reaction to the song, and without missing a beat, dropped to one knee on the stage and held out the microphone to her. She wrapped her hands around his, and began singing in a clear, beautiful voice that belied her age. She swayed. She sang. And tears rolled down her cheeks.

When the song was over, the few of us gathered around the bandstand cheered and clapped. Most people on the deck were unaware of what had just taken place. But those of us who experienced it knew we had been a part of something very special.

The story impacted me in a couple of ways. First, I have been around a lot of singers and a lot of bands. They may be great people, but they also are very possessive of their craft. They want their performance to be perfect, and turning the microphone over to a perfect stranger on the spur of the moment puts perfection in serious jeopardy. But the young singer did not hesitate. He saw something special happening in front of him and chose to facilitate it, rather than shutting it down in the interest of his band's set.

The second thing is something on which I have reflected for the past couple of weeks. It has to do with our awareness of the people around us. Most of us come in contact with dozens

– if not hundreds – of people each day. Some of them are absolutely content with their lives. Some of them are anxious and worried. Some are hurting. Most of them won’t tell you how they are feeling. They are simply going through the motions of life. But if we are really paying attention, we can pick up on the clues. And when we do, the opportunity for ministry is present.

Now don’t misunderstand, I’m not suggesting that you whip out your pocket Bible and begin sharing Scripture with someone who obviously has a lot on their mind. But a kind word, a word of encouragement, a simple statement affirming their worth, those can go a long way in reaching into a hurting life and sharing the love of Christ. And it can make all the difference in someone’s day – even a life.

That day on the pool deck, I’m not sure what happened. I suspect that song stirred memories of a love long lost and for those few minutes, made it real again. Maybe it was a reminder of a love so deep that an old woman chose to remain a widow for more than a half-century. But whatever happened, it was special, and I was grateful to be a part of it. And it happened not because of any deep theological concept, but because a young man looked past his immediate task and saw an opportunity. And he chose to act on it.

See you Sunday.