



Winged with Longing for Better Things



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Libby, Montana



LIZZY LIVED IN THE TINY LOGGING TOWN of Libby in northwest Montana. She'd grown up the daughter of a prohibition bootlegger and loved to tell the story of how as a little girl she'd climb into the rumble seat of their old Ford with cases of moonshine whiskey stacked underneath her while her dad crossed icy one-lane mountain passes to deliver his spirits to the neighboring towns. The story was her way of speaking of an even more rough and tumble time in her life than her retired years. It was also a warning for those with ears to hear not to underestimate her courage or her spunk.

When Lizzy was still young, she married and had a son. Not too long after their son was born, her husband abandoned her. Lizzy worked at city hall, earning enough money to keep a roof over her and her son's head. She had a tiny one-bedroom house near the railroad tracks, and by the time I knew her she was long retired; she and Robbie depended on her Social Security check and the carpentry work he could find in the small rural town and surrounding counties. She slept on a twin bed in the hallway between the bathroom and the kitchen so that Robbie could have the bedroom for himself.

Despite her own poverty, she fed the many homeless strangers who knocked on her door after hopping a train. She knew what it meant to be hungry, and feeding the hungry was a Christian imperative for her. She was at church every Sunday. She served on the altar guild. She baked pies for the church's Nordic Fest pie booth. She was a frail, almost five-foot-tall, kind, gentle, giving, and forgiving giant of a Christian woman! When she developed lung cancer, she took it in stride. There was no money for expensive chemotherapies,

and so the doctors did what they could to keep her as comfortable as possible as the cancer progressed. Robbie cared for her as best he could, and the church brought her communion and healing prayers when she became too weak to come to church.

What Lizzy didn't know, what none of us knew until some years after she died, was that WR Grace mining company had for some years been poisoning the whole town, dumping highly carcinogenic material in this small lumber and mining town, with some of the most toxic deposits of all in the part of town where Lizzy's house stood. Hundreds in that town have died from their exposure. Millions across the country have been exposed to asbestos-laden vermiculite products produced by the mine, manufactured across the country, and distributed as insulation, fertilizer, and building material. Miles and miles of the topsoil of Libby had to be taken up and removed by the EPA to eliminate the carcinogens after lawsuits finally forced the closure of the mine. Friends, like Lizzy, were lost to vicious lung cancers, while the ravenous greed of a few corporate officers, never convicted of a crime, was being fed. Lizzy, our sister Lizzy, needed an advocate. Lizzy needed to be tended and befriended so that she would not be invisible in her suffering and her pain. Lizzy's story is not an isolated story. There are still many, many people like Lizzy in Libby and in the world paying the price for others' greed. Might we become advocates for them?

Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58

Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.
“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to our God?

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of our God shall be your rearguard.
Then you shall call, and our God will answer;
you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
Our God will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many
generations;

you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of our God honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own
affairs;

then you shall take delight in our God,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the
earth;

I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of our God has spoken.

Meditation

Nearly twenty years ago I heard a news story about research done in the field of psychology. It seems that much of the research to develop central theories about the human mind and the human psyche had been done exclusively on men. One of the places where this held true was in the research on the “fight or flight” phenomenon which says, of course, that when presented with a threat, there are two basic binary human responses—either to face the threat, and fight to defeat our enemy, or to run from the threat in hopes of escaping it.

But something interesting happened when, toward the end of the twentieth century, women began to be included as subjects in similar experiments. The binary began to fall

apart. Yes, sometimes the response was still to fight. And sometimes the response was to flee. But there now seemed to be a third option that had been overlooked in those earlier studies: the option that came to be named by some as the “tend and befriend” option. It was not a response that was exclusive to women, nor was it the only response women could make, but when women were added into the equation, the response became statistically significant. In the midst of some threats, there appeared to be no alternative but to fight to defend oneself or one’s young. In other situations, the only way to survive was to outrun the danger. But sometimes, sometimes life presents us with the option to survive by seeing ourselves as a part of something larger.

“Tend and befriend” suggests one response to a threat can be to gather around us those who are most in danger and tend to them, while befriending others facing—or instigating—a similar danger. The solution to life’s gravest threats may not always come through an exclusive focus on self-preservation. Self-preservation paradoxically can come through, to quote one of my favorite self-help resources, “loving your neighbor as yourself.”

In this age, the church is facing real threats, and every limb of the church must decide how to respond to those threats. When should we stand in sacred resistance and fight? When should we remove ourselves from a dangerous situation? And when should we turn and face into the dangers together in solidarity and in support of one another? Put another way, when must we exchange *I* and *my* for *we* and *our*—loving our neighbors as ourselves? When must each of the individual members of the body come together

with others to create a functioning whole? Often in our lone individuality, we look small and insignificant, near invisible. But together, together we cannot be overlooked, uncounted, or discounted.

Prayer

God, who called us into being and stirs our hearts to love, give us the strength and will to stand together and face the forces of pernicious greed and craven self-serving within our society and our world. Empower us to stand with the weakest and most vulnerable, bearing within our bodies evidence of what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Drought

That night,
 we all prayed for rain;
 like superstitious old men,
 we scratched a hole in the dust,
 burying talismans from our lives:
 a set of keys from a wrecked car;
 a child's string of plastic beads;
 a wedding ring;
 a bleached white bone,
 strung on a red satin ribbon.
And when we finally slept,
 we each dreamed the same dream:
 that a tree sprouted out of the ground
 where we had planted—

grew, withered and died before daybreak;
and that god cared nothing for our gifts
 anyway,
in fact, required only our hearts,
 good and pure and true,
 which we stubbornly withheld,
 thirsty, but fearful of the cost.