

SERMON

STARTERS

Sonya Wu

June 13, 2004 **2nd Sunday after Pentecost**

1 Kings 21:1-21a; Ps. 5:1-8
Gal. 2:15-21; Lk. 7:36-8:3

In the movie, *The Color of Paradise*, young, blind Mohammed waits for his father to pick him up from school. As he waits, Mohammed hears the faint chirping of a young bird which has fallen out of its nest. Mohammed feels his way toward the chick and tenderly picks it up, puts it in his shirt pocket, and climbs the nearby tree. He eventually locates the nest, carefully returns the chick to its home, and climbs down. When Mohammed's father arrives, his face is filled with disgust and disappointment as he sees his disabled son, disheveled and dirty from the tree climb. What the father sees in his son is very different from what we, the audience of the movie, have just seen—a gentle boy who has just shown great compassion. We know this boy in a way that even his father does not.

The question of knowing a person, of one's identity, is central to this passage. Whereas Matthew and Mark focus on the costliness of the ointment, Luke focuses on the identity of the woman, detailing her dramatic actions. Simon says that if Jesus was a prophet he would know, as Simon knows, who and what kind of woman this is. Ironically, Jesus does indeed know and turns the question on Simon. "Do you really see and know this woman?" Jesus asks, "You think you know her but you have missed who she really is—one who is forgiven, one who has shown great love."

Jean Vanier, in his book *Becoming Human*, talks about love as that which "can help others to discover their own intrinsic value...(and) reveal to them their beauty and their uniqueness."¹ Love allows us to know and be known. Love's revealing is not the kind that Simon thought should happen, the kind that surfaces our most fearful secrets and leads to our rejection by others. Rather, Jesus' love

is a revealing through the eyes of grace by which we are known to our core as persons who are loved, forgiven, and sent forth in peace.

June 20, 2004 **3rd Sunday after Pentecost**

1 Kings 19:1-15a; Ps. 42
Gal. 3:23-29; Lk. 8:26-39

Early in Elijah's story we witness him being fed three times, first by ravens (1 Kings 17:6), next by the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 10-16), and then in this passage by an angel.

But Elijah had another, deeper hunger that needed feeding. On Mt. Horeb, God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?" and Elijah's response speaks of hunger, not of the stomach but of an inner emptiness caused by loneliness, fear and despair. He had been sent as a prophet to the people of Israel but Israel had turned from God and fallen into worship of other gods. Elijah was frustrated and scared about the dangers both he and the Israelites faced. In the wilderness Elijah had cried out, "It is enough...take away my life" and now, not a little self-righteously, he complains to God, "the Israelites have done all these terrible things and I alone am left."

In response to Elijah's complaining to his hunger and fear, God feeds Elijah again with an experience of God's presence. But on Mt. Horeb God comes not in wind, earthquake or fire—ways that God had revealed Godself before. This time God comes in the unexpected and unusual theophany of silence. And yet the experience does not seem to have much effect on Elijah. When God asks Elijah the same question, "What are you doing here?" Elijah responds with the exact same answer, "... I alone am left." Elijah has been fed again but has not recognized this different kind of food or this way of being fed.

So God feeds yet again with a word of hope that might seem as inaudible and

intangible as silence, a word about the future. Perhaps this is the message in the silence that Elijah missed the first time around. God says, "You are not alone. Elisha is coming. Israel as a people will not die. A remnant will live on." God will work through history itself, through a slow procession of kings and prophets, to bring about God's will for Israel. Israel will live out the consequences of its own disobedience but a remnant will rebuild. And God says, "Take, eat."

June 27, 2004 **4th Sunday after Pentecost**

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Ps. 77:1-2, 11-20
Gal. 5:1, 13-25; Lk. 9:51-62

In Michael Ondaatje's book, *The Skin of a Lion*, a group of nuns accidentally walks onto a windy bridge that is under construction late one night. One nun is swept off the bridge and the others believe she has fallen to her death at the bottom of the valley. But a worker, strapped to a harness below the bridge, hears her scream, reaches out and grabs her, dislocating his shoulder in the process. Silently and in shock, the two inch their way to solid ground and walk away from the bridge, unnoticed by the others. The woman takes off her nun's veil, makes a sling for the worker's arm, and sees him to his friend's house. Then she steps back out into the night city, letting the world continue to presume her former self dead as she walks into an entirely new life.

Jesus now journeys toward Jerusalem and his message to would-be followers is a demanding one. Discipleship means a life radically changed from one's previous life.

Jesus' three responses to the potential disciples deal with home and family for this will change significantly if they join Jesus. First Jesus says that he and any who follow him will not have a physical home of their own but will depend completely on the hospitality of others.² Jesus also warns that following him will change one's priorities and obligations. Even such a

primary relationship as one's family will change as family is redefined, not by blood but by the Kingdom of God which makes sisters, brothers, mothers and fathers of the least likely people. Samaritans, sinners, outcasts, and the poor are the ones with whom Jesus and his followers will make a home. Finally, Jesus warns that this journey of discipleship will require one's whole self and there can be no looking back, holding back, or second-guessing. Jesus seems to say, "This journey of discipleship will be like falling off a bridge, dying to the life you had before, and falling into the arms of a whole new life. You will leave behind what is most familiar to enter into a kingdom life where a new home, new family and new future will be given to you."

July 4, 2004
5th Sunday after Pentecost
2 Kings 5: 1-14; Ps. 30
Gal. 6: (1-6) 7-16; Lk. 10:1-11; 16-20

This passage is full of interactions between the powerful and the powerless. Naaman's journey toward healing begins when the powerful army commander listens to a young captive servant girl. When Naaman finds his way to Elisha's door, he expects the prophet of a defeated land to come out to meet him. He also expects to be healed by a display of power by Elisha's God. Naaman is used to knowing how power looks and works. When Elisha fails to meet his expectations, he leaves angry but is again led toward healing by his servants. Naaman, despite his wealth and authority, could not cure himself. Rather, his healing depended on listening to those over whom he exercised power. Naaman's healing transformed him into one who mirrored the powerless; Naaman's skin became like of a young boy's, making him in some respect like the "young girl" from whom he first learned of the healing prophet.

When Oscar Romero became Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, he assumed the position of ultimate power within the Catholic Church in El Salvador. His appointment was welcomed by the politically and economically powerful as one who was sympathetic to their interests. Yet soon after he took office, Archbishop Romero experienced several

disturbing events which opened his ears to the peasants of his country. He listened to their stories and became aware of the military and government's campaign of violence against the poor. His listening marked his own healing and conversion from one whose life of privilege and power had made him unaware of and complicit in suffering to one who became intricately connected to the poor around him. Until his assassination in 1980, Romero lived in solidarity with the powerless, working for justice and experiencing the danger from which he had been previously immune.

What healing might those of us in power in our workplaces, our church, our families, or our world be directed to by listening to those who are considered powerless?

July 11, 2004
6th Sunday after Pentecost
Amos 7:7-17; Ps. 82
Col. 1:1-14; Lk. 10:25-37

While Luke's first audience was likely Gentile and would have identified with the Samaritan, a fellow outcast from Jewish society, the parable itself is told by Jesus to a Jewish hearer, the lawyer.³ This story takes on a different twist to a Jewish hearer who would assume the beaten man to be Jewish unless specifically identified otherwise. But a Jewish hearer is more likely to wait and identify with the hero that is sure to come onto the scene than with the victim of violence.⁴ The hero, however, is a Samaritan—to Jews a contemptible heretic. It would have been impossible for a Jewish hearer to identify with the Samaritan given the hatred between the two groups, so the only one who remains on the scene is the beaten man. The Jewish listener is made to identify with one who is in the repulsive position of being saved by one's enemy.⁵

In the movie *Gandhi*, during violence between Hindus and Muslims, a distraught Hindu man comes to Gandhi and confesses to killing a Muslim child in revenge for his own child's murder by a Muslim. He says he knows he is going to hell. Gandhi tells him, "I know a way out of hell," and instructs him to find a Muslim child orphaned by the recent violence and to raise that child as his own,

but as a Muslim. This Hindu man's redemption out of the hell of his violent life will come through the life he and his enemy will build together as parent and child.

Who are our neighbors and our enemies? Who are the ones who represent that which we despise? What if we discovered ourselves in a situation in which just such a person is the instrument of our salvation? In preaching this message among those who would name the enemy as an abuser or oppressor, one must avoid equating such enemies with instruments of salvation. In this story, however, the enemy is one who stands on the other side of the lines we wrongly draw to separate and alienate.

July 18, 2004
7th Sunday after Pentecost
Amos 8:1-12; Ps. 52 or Ps 82
Col. 1:15-28; Lk. 10: 38-42

Biblical stories are often like conversation partners with whom we carry on a dialogue that does not necessarily reach a conclusion but, instead, continues over a lifetime as we bring our life's experiences to the biblical text. For many, the dialogue with this story is far from over.

Some see Jesus' acts of being a guest at a woman's home and teaching a woman as signs of Jesus' radical and liberating message for women and indeed all who are oppressed or considered "less." Many have found in Jesus' praise of Mary clear affirmation for Jesus' acceptance of women disciples and for women's theological education.⁶ Yet when compared to the dialogic learning of male disciples (5:1-11, 8:4-15), Mary's learning is passive. She does not question but sits silently. In contrast, Martha speaks daring words of challenge to Jesus.

Some women find in Jesus' chastisement of Martha a liberating word for those who are imprisoned in gendered roles of serving. But, interestingly, many of us identify closely with Martha and find Jesus' words unfair. In the parable immediately preceding this story, Jesus commends the Samaritan for his active service to another. Yet Martha's active service is diminished. Why cannot Martha be an equal example of active service?

In John's Gospel, we encounter very

different pictures of Martha and Mary who are both models of faith. Why has Luke chosen to portray Martha and Mary in the manner he does?

We are not yet through with this story. Perhaps like Jacob who wrestled with an angel and finally received a blessing, we too are called to wrestle with this and other biblical stories whose meanings are not immediately clear. As we refuse to let go, bringing into conversation with this story our experiences of being welcomed and being silenced, of good work and overwork, of affirmation and chastisement, we may receive a word of liberation and blessing.

July 25, 2004
8th Sunday after Pentecost

HOS. 1:2-10; Ps. 85
 Col. 2:6-15 (16-19); Lk. 11:1-13

In this passage, Paul writes to the young church in Colossae, a church living a crisis of confidence, challenged by proponents of a “philosophy” who questioned the adequacy of Christianity.⁷ Although identifying the specific nature of this philosophy is difficult, adherents to the philosophy seem to be telling the new Colossian Christians that the wisdom of Christianity is not sufficient for spiritual maturity. Rather, they believe that perfection can only be achieved by mastering additional religious practices such as following a particular diet, observing physical asceticism, and even attaining visions.⁸ Mastery of such things has caused the followers of the “philosophy” to judge and condemn others who had not yet achieved such practices.

Paul, however, reminds the church that all they need for spiritual maturity has already been given them in Christ, in whom they have already come to fullness. In Christ they have already been reconciled to God and raised from the dead to new life, belonging in baptism to one who has power over all rulers and authorities. The church in Colossae has already been rooted in faith and now can grow to maturity by increasing in the wisdom they already have in Christ.⁹

What “philosophies” in our day hold us captive to the belief that our perfection will come through sources other than the gifts of God we have already been given?

In what ways do “philosophies” such as militarism, consumerism, or unchecked technological advancement tell us that we are not enough? In contrast to these philosophies we, as persons of faith, have been given gifts such as baptism which breaks the power death has over us and brings us into the community of faith, or forgiveness which enables us to be reconciled to God and others. How do these gifts of God help us know that our wholeness and fullness will come by moving deeper into the kingdom knowledge we have already been given?

August 1, 2003
9th Sunday after Pentecost

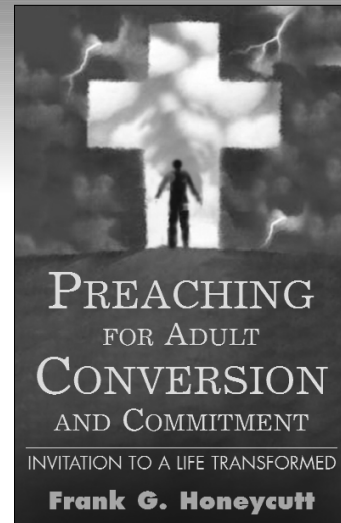
Hosea 11:1-11; Ps. 107:1-9, 43
 Col. 3:1-11; Lk. 12:13-21

The prophet Hosea speaks in beautiful, tender metaphor of God as a parent with her child Israel. For some this metaphor can be confusing and unsettling given experiences with troubled parents. But it can also be an illuminating image—God as a mother, lifting her infant to her cheek, marveling at the softness of baby skin. God as a father making airplanes with spoonfuls of mashed banana. God as mother, circling her child with her protective arms of love. God as father, extending his arms to his tottering child who takes shaky steps across the carpet.

But Hosea also tells the troubling story of the child Israel’s disobedience and betrayal of its covenant with God which results in terrible consequences. Israel’s spiritual separation from God, evidenced in its worship of other gods, is paralleled by the Israelites’ physical separation from the land of Israel. Yet God, in a display of unconditional parental love, does not turn God’s back on Israel but, in love, chooses Israel again. God has chosen Israel before, and God continues to choose Israel, returning Israel from exile back to home.

Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies*, describes a time when a fellow church member told about adopting her son through an organization called ASK, Adopt Special Kids. Part of the adoption process included filling out a questionnaire checking yes or no to one’s willingness to adopt babies that had been born addicted, terminally ill, with physical “defects,” or mental disabilities. She and

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 adults to
 the gospel**



As society becomes increasingly less familiar with the Christian gospel, preaching it is more crucial today than ever before. In *Preaching for Adult Conversion and Commitment: Invitation to a Life Transformed*, pastor and author Frank G. Honeycutt answers a seemingly simple question: How does preaching assist the Holy Spirit in the ongoing conversion of adult Christians? Honeycutt takes a close look at exactly what the sermon does in the larger conversion process, both for newcomers and for longtime members needing a deeper commitment to faith. UI7-0687023149. \$15.00

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 **Abingdon Press**

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CIRN065801 9263

her husband had checked down the list. Lamott's pastor said that God, too, is like an adoptive parent who says, "Sure, I'll take the kids who are addicted, or terminal. I pick all the retarded kids and of course the sadists. The selfish one, the liars ..."¹⁰ I choose them. I choose the disobedient ones and the terrified ones. The self-indulged ones and the trouble-makers. The damaged ones and the unlovable ones. In love, I choose them all. I will be a parent to them all. I will end their separation and bring them home to me.

- 1 Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) 77.
- 2 Fred Craddock, Luke, *Interpretation* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990) 144.
- 3 Bernard Brandon Scott, "Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus," (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 192.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 194.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 201.
- 6 Jane Schaberg, *Luke, Women's Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992) 377.
- 7 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 396.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, 397.
- 10 Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts On Faith* (New York: Anchor Books) 254-255.



Sonya Wu graduated recently from Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia and now lives in Toronto.

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