

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

Linking With Our Context

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She was black, she was poor, she was uneducated, a victim of the triple oppression of racism, sexism and classism. To most it would appear that she had no power at all. Yet she used the power that she had, the power to say no, when she refused to give up her seat to a white man on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S.A. Her name was Rosa Parks, and she is the mother of the civil rights movement, the woman who's *no* unleashed the historic movement that resounded around the world. But, most importantly, her defiant *no* unleashed the power within her, and within so many of the oppressed groups within the United States, to challenge successfully the most powerful country in the world to end the system of racial segregation.

Anna is the mother of five children. She and her family live in a slum on the outskirts of Buenos Aires in Argentina. It is like any other slum, whether in Calcutta, Colombo, or Manila. Anna wakes up at 3:00 a.m., does her housework, cooks, cleans, and sends the younger children off to school, and then she and her sixteen year old daughter take a two hour bus ride to attend the nine a.m. opening worship to a workshop on "Women and Power". After the day ended they would take another two-hour bus ride back to the slum where they lived. Anna's passion is to empower the women in her neighborhood to a better life. The women meet daily in a dilapidated room to cook a mid-day meal for about 50 children. By pooling their resources they make sure that their children have one fairly wholesome meal a day. They know they have some skills. They know there is more to life than the daily grind into which they are bound. Anna has sad and angry eyes and she asks, "Why? Why can't we make a better life? Is it because we are women? Or is there some other reason?"

Stories like these tell us the church has some more work to do around demonstrating and living out solidarity with women, with people who still suffer because of racism, sexism, and classism. We have been blessed and have received grace through the love of God. We then need to be committed to being proclaimers of the message of the full life of God's reign revealed to us through Jesus. We need to live the words, "a just society."

In the book, *Jacob's Blessing* written by Donna Sinclair and Christopher White there is a story about Stevie Cameron.

Stevie Cameron is an active member of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in downtown Toronto, a historic church that recalls the glories of the city's history. For years, church was not a part of Stevie Cameron's life. But then her life began to change, her friends started to die, and she discovered that she was missing a community of faith to help her get through these transitions. So she started to "church shop." At St. Andrew's she found a sense of belonging. She loved the music, and was challenged by the sermons.

But she was not content just to sit in on Sundays. If she was going to attend, she needed to be truly committed.

About this time, people in Toronto were growing concerned about the homeless on their streets. People were dying of exposure and hunger in the wealthiest city in Canada, in a country that the United Nations rates the best place to live on earth. Clearly, it is not the “best place” for all Canadian citizens.

Toronto churches responded with the “Out of the Cold” Program. It was based on the biblical premise that the church is called to provide for the poor and dispossessed. John’s gospel says, “Feed my sheep.” Homeless folks are fed dinner and given shelter for the night. Cameron was one of those who urged St. Andrew’s to join this important ministry.

Not surprisingly, the governing bodies of the church had concerns. “What would it do to the church to have poor people sleeping in our basement?” they wondered.

And the obvious response came back: “What does it do to the church to have those people sleeping on our sidewalks?”

Stevie Cameron and her co-workers estimated that maybe 50 people would show up the first night. They prepared a meal of powdered soup, day-old donated muffins and donuts. When they opened the church doors, almost a hundred people crowded the steps, too many for the food prepared. A group of Catholic nuns arrived to help out and see how the volunteers were doing. They all shook their heads in dismay, opened their wallets, pooled their resources and ordered pizza.

That first night was an eye opener for Stevie. The food wasn’t what she would want to eat, and she wasn’t surprised that nobody else wanted it either. “Why should the poor get the leftovers of our tables,” she wondered. “Why should they always get other peoples cast-offs?”

That night she determined to do something about it. By coincidence, she knew how to prepare food that is both appetizing and nutritious; she’s a trained chef. In spite of an extremely busy journalistic schedule, Stevie decided that she would give the gift of her skill to the homeless. So she spent every Sunday night in the church basement preparing soups, stews, and casseroles for the people who would be fed the next day.

It was an incredible commitment, completed without resentment, and without having her arm twisted by the chair of some nominating committee. It was lived out of genuine, old-fashioned Christian love and faith, someone who knew about growing the realm of God.

The results of her living faith have been spectacular. Every Monday night 300 people crowd into the church basement, and are served by 250 volunteers. Business people and teachers, men and women, gladly give their time to participate in this taste of God’s realm.

This is a ministry that creates a visible impact in that downtown neighborhood. The impact is not simply on the people receiving these services. In some way the greatest impact is reserved for those who serve.

When Cameron was asked, “What does the church offer that no one else does?” she responded immediately, “community.”

Where else in our society can you find a place that provides opportunity to serve your neighbor and find yourself at the same time? True intimacy is almost completely absent in our public life. We routinely ask each other the most dangerous question one human being can ask another: “how are you?” – knowing that they will not tell us, that we don’t really want to know.

Except in the church. There we do want to know. And we will try truly to listen to the answer. That’s the gift of community. There was more to Stevie’s answer. She went on to say that “There’s something about us that we have to change. Mainline churches don’t ask enough of their people nor do they ask for enough of their money. Although I think we are starting to get better at asking for money.

She’s right – say Sinclair and White but we need to demand the right sort of things. Too often, we beg time and energy simply to maintain the institution. But we don’t offer mission. A recent *McLean’s* magazine article asserted that for most Canadians, the most important factor in their employment is not money or security, but a sense of doing something worthwhile. If they have a sense of mission, people will no longer experience committees and board work as something they would rather not do – rather, they will welcome meetings as a means of developing strategies to carry out that mission.

That is how the realm of God is built. Strategy by strategy, small step by small step.

This church knows it needs to be linked closely with the world around us. That’s the will of the gospel. I think back through the years and remember all the links we have made. Remember all those milk cartons we hung in the entryway the year our Lenten project was providing milk for underdeveloped countries, or the year we put tin roofs on houses, the year we sent money to buy goats, I think we raised enough for 143 goats or something like that. I remember the shovels too. Our U.C.W. is linked in so many ways with hurting people and places, through the Fellowship of the Least Coin, the Bissell Tree, through all the money gifts they give. Then there is the Food for Kids program, the Food Bank, Martha’s Table, Neighborlink, who soon will ask for volunteers for their event in August. Through the grace of God’s love, we can respond. What about our refugee committee – whose commitment and hard work have made the lives of several families so much better. We need to hear about HIV/Aids, crystal meth and the growing drug problem here in our own community and decide what our response as church needs to be. What is our prophetic voice; what is the voice of the church saying? Is it saying anything at all to those whose lives are being destroyed by addictions?

In today’s gospel, Jesus says, “The Realm of God is like planting a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. And yet, when it is planted and germinates, it grows and grows to become.... a weed, about a foot high. Anyone who has farmed knows about mustard as a weed. There are about four different strains.

A weed? Well, that’s somewhat impressive, we suppose, yet not very.

“Jesus,” the disciples say, “We don’t like being compared to a weed.”

Jesus thus reminds us that God is not impressed by the world's standards of measurement. The world regards the Jesus movement as small, insignificant, powerless. Yet in such seemingly small ways, the world is being transformed.

The Realm of God is a weed! Tiny seeds germinate, take root, and sprout up here and there all over town. Like quack grass, you can't overcome it, no matter how you try.

Of all the images of God's people, the church – body of Christ, people of the Spirit, realm of God – the image of us as a seemingly insignificant but pesky weed may not be one of the most appealing. However, it is an image of comfort.

Look at our congregation. The world may regard us as small and statistically insignificant. But through the miraculous workings of God, we are making a difference. Those tiny seeds have been planted, they are sprouting, taking root, cropping up all over. Recall all the things we have done to make a difference, to link and stay linked to a hurting world.

When it come to building the Realm of God, there probably are places where we have some dry bones but with the grace of the love of God, with our relationship to one another and our neighbors, we can dream and vision, to continue to grow the weed, to do our own prophesying to whatever bones are dry to give them life again. As God's people, may we be a sign of God's relentless determination to retake a lost world.