

August 25, 2013

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

Hebrews 12:18-29

LUKE 13:10-17

GOD GIVES VOICES TO THE VOICELESS

Much of the history I was taught in school was the history of the “uprodden”, of kings, generals, movers and shakers, the elite, what they did or tried to do. In the last generation there has been an overdue upsurge in history written “from the bottom up” which searches for the voices of the too-often ignored mass of the people, searching for their lives and for their deaths that those who often could not write could at last tell their stories to the world.

Yesterday, Mel Garber led over a dozen Christ Church people on a pilgrimage to New York to two historical monuments for which he did the engineering work: the Irish Hunger Memorial, commemorating the one million Irish who died during the great famine of 1845-52 and the hundreds of thousands who desperately emigrated to America in its wake, and the African Burial Ground, a National Monument honoring the memory of over 15,000 African slaves from the 17th and 18th Centuries whose remains lie mostly underneath the buildings of modern New York but whose voices now speak to us at last.

In the Baptismal Covenant we vow to “respect the dignity of every human being”, and this idea is finally getting a little more traction in our national consciousness, though there is a long way to go, and we as Christians are called to honor those who died and also right now strive to end slavery and starvation everywhere and forever.

God has been about this business for a long time and urges God’s followers to “get with the program.” “Let my people go” rings loudly from the Old Testament and “Did you feed the hungry?” trumpets from the New Testament, and from both parts of the Bible we hear God listening to *and giving voice to* the “voiceless” and those often not listened to by mortals.

In today’s Gospel we see Jesus being about the business of *liberation*, in this case liberation of a woman, a “daughter of Abraham”, from a condition which had crippled her for 18 years. Jesus blitzed right through the scruples of a powerful, male, uncrippled religious leader who wanted her to *wait* for liberation because he thought healing was

“work” which should not happen on the Sabbath. Jesus was not willing to make her wait one more day to be healed.

“Woman, you are freed from your ailment”, Jesus declared, then he touched her and she stood up straight -- *and she spoke, praising God*. Power came from Jesus to the powerless, voice to the voiceless.

Really, God has been about giving voices to the voiceless for centuries *before* Jesus, and we hear this vividly in today’s Old Testament reading: the call of the great Jeremiah to be a prophet. The mission of a prophet was and is to speak God’s word to God’s people and to the world, to say what they *needed* to hear, which was very often not what they *wanted* to hear.

Jeremiah, like many other great prophets and leaders, felt unworthy of God’s commission. He focussed his sense of unworthiness on a matter that his contemporaries would have agreed with him on: he was *too young* to speak, too young to be listened to. God replies to him that God had a plan for Jeremiah before he was born, that his life was sacred to God while he was still in his mother’s womb. Jeremiah’s lips were touched by God and he accepted his call. His words are still ones we *need to read* and to *heed* today as well.

But Jeremiah was not the last young person who spoke profound words which adults need to hear and heed. As you prepare to welcome a rector who has a two year old daughter, only the second rector of Christ Church with a small child in the last 80 years, let me share with you some of the voices of children I can remember.

Thirty years ago I led my church’s Kindergarten Sunday School class into the sanctuary to teach them things they could learn about our faith from what they could see and touch. It was Easter Season and the church had a Paschal Candle front and center, one with five stylized nails in it to remind us of the five wounds of Christ on his hands, feet and in his side. I explained about Jesus loving us so much that he was willing to suffer for us by having nails drilled into his hands.

A little boy listened intently, looked at the nails and then looked at his hands. He held up his hands to me and said of the nails, “There’s no place for them to fit.” “Yes,” I replied, “that’s why it hurt so much.”

Years later, when my son was five or six his mother was chosen to chant the “Exsultet” at the Great Vigil of Easter, as the church did not have a deacon at the time. I

explained to my son that the service would run way past his bedtime and that he would go home with Mommy after she sang. He looked at me with big, horrified eyes and said, "But Daddy, then I would miss communion!" Oh, well then.

One Easter Sunday at a different church I have served, a 10 year old girl showed up bright and early with her grandmother and great-grandmother because she wanted to be the first Greeter to be on duty on Easter Sunday. She loved to welcome people, especially new people. As I was getting my robes on, she bounced into the sacristy and said cheerily, "Father Frank, we have newcomers I want you to meet!"

The newcomers were an unemployed single father and his developmentally disabled daughter. Would be O.K. if they came to our church on Easter? Yes, indeed. They sat with the 10 year old girl and her grandmother and great-grandmother. As the girl had matter-of-factly told me before, "I don't know who my father is and I don't know where my mother is." But she knows who her Father in Heaven is, and she can't wait to introduce people to him and to her church family, which is a *real* family for her. Jesus says so.

I taught Vacation Bible School for years at another church, always the Junior High Class. Vacation Bible School is a one week Christian Day Camp: three hours a day packed with a Bible lesson, songs, crafts, games, snacks and assemblies. It teaches basic Christianity. One year the five lessons were: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Jesus' Resurrection, and New Life in Christ.

The passage about Creation included Genesis 1:27, in which it says that *all* people, male and female alike, are created in the image of God. That means, I told the class, "that all of you are *priceless*."

We had two kids from Catholic Charities' Homeless Shelter in Edison in my class that year. They -- *and* some of the other kids -- sat bolt upright and stared at me with their mouths open. "What?" "You're priceless," I repeated, "God says so."

Well, we explored that a little. The next morning, at the start of the lesson, I went up to one of the girls from the shelter and, trying unsuccessfully to look stern, asked her, "How much are you worth? 49 cents?" She giggled and said, "No." "Oh, you up to 98 cents now?" "No." How much are you worth?" In a very quiet voice she said, "I'm priceless." "Who told you that?" "God did." "That's right, and don't ever let anyone tell you any different."

By the end of the week, *she* was leading that same back-and-forth dialogue with the entire Vacation Bible School. 100 kids were taught that they were priceless by a girl who knew that, though she was homeless, she was still priceless. God says so.

And there's the voice of one more child I'd like you to hear, one I was not honored to hear myself, but which I read about. He was a seven year old boy with Down's Syndrome. He was in the mainstream Sunday School class but he got teased by the kids for being, they said, "dumb." Until one day when all the teasing stopped and was replaced by awe and wonder.

It was Easter Season, and the teacher had asked the kids to bring "symbols of new life" to class. Most kids brought in flowers they had picked, or pictures of butterflies. The boy with Down's Syndrome brought in a plastic container for L'Eggs pantyhose, which is shaped like an egg in two halves.

The other kids gave it to him. "You dummy, that's not a symbol of new life. That's plastic. You messed up again." "It is too a symbol of new life," said the boy, beginning to cry, and he opened the L'Eggs container and displayed half of it with the open mouth facing the class. "It's empty. The tomb is empty."

The class sat in stunned silence, then embraced him. The class was transformed. The boy died later that year from medical problems that finally overwhelmed him. His whole Sunday School class came to his funeral, and they solemnly walked up to the altar and placed on it a symbol of new life, an empty L'Eggs container. The tomb was empty.

"The Lord said to Jeremiah, 'Do not say, 'I am only a boy;' for you shall go to all to whom I shall send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.'"

I can't think about the empty tomb, about Genesis 1:27, about welcoming newcomers at Easter, about staying up late to receive communion, or about the nails on a Paschal Candle without hearing the voices of those children. May we all savor that spiritual gift we received at baptism, "the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works", including all young people and children.

The Rev. Dr. Francis A. Hubbard
Christ Episcopal Church
New Brunswick, New Jersey