

“The Geography of Salvation”

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7, Luke 17: 11-19

20th Sunday after Pentecost/C, October 10, 2010

Lynne M. Dolan

On April 20, 1999, two students at Columbine High School in Colorado shot and killed twelve fellow students and one teacher. The two students then killed themselves. The first victim in the Columbine High School shooting was Rachel Scott, a 17 year old student. She was sitting outside eating lunch with a friend when she was shot. Her father, Darrell Scott, has begun a campaign called Rachel’s Challenge. Just a week after her death, Rachel’s family found in her room a tracing of hands with these words – “These hands belong to Rachel Joy Scott and will one day touch millions of people’s hearts.”

When her family received Rachel’s backpack from the school, they found her diary with a bullet hole through it. In the diary were words of compassion and an essay telling about her personal ethics – that your actions can represent your character and your character can change someone else’s life. Mr. Scott travels to schools throughout the United States to share the story of his daughter – her life, her death and her hopes for kindness and compassion. Using his daughter’s own words found in her diaries, he offers students a challenge to start a chain reaction of kindness. She wrote, “I have this theory that if one person can go out of their way to show compassion then it will start a chain reaction of the same.”

In September, Mr. Scott visited middle schools in Roanoke County, Virginia. One young man, the son of Kelly Derrick, a member of St. Phillip Lutheran Church in Roanoke, offered this reflection of his experience: “Mr. Scott told us about Rachel. She was nice, kind and compassionate. Rachel wanted to reach out to people who are disabled, bullied, or left out of groups. Adam was a disabled student and one of the ones most bullied at their school. If she could help people like Adam then he could share an act of kindness with another. Rachel’s Challenge is to start a chain reaction – one small act of kindness can lead to another and another and another. Like you could help someone pick up their books, or you could not have prejudice toward someone before you even know them.”¹

The stories we hear this morning are filled with outsiders. In the Hebrew text, Jeremiah writes to the people of Israel who have just become outsiders living in exile in Babylon. They are forced to live in a foreign land, with a foreign language and foreign customs. Jeremiah warns them to get used to this because their exile is not a short term situation. Contrary to what the false prophets were telling them, the end was not near. Therefore, he instructs them to make peace with their situation. He invites them to not merely tolerate it, but to find ways to prosper and to thrive in spite of the circumstances under which they are now forced to live. Even though Jeremiah does not tell the exiles what they want to hear, he begins a chain reaction of compassion with his care and honesty.

¹ Faith Lens, October 6-12, 2010, “Rachel’s Challenge,” contributed by Kelly Derrick, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America website.

In the gospel story there are outsiders as well: the lepers, the Samaritan and perhaps even Jesus. Lepers were unclean, suffering from a contagious skin disease that caused them to be shunned by society. They were excluded from homes and other places where people gathered. Lepers were both physically and spiritually unclean. Purification rites were performed for lepers who recovered. Jesus reaches out to these outsiders, shows them mercy and quietly makes them well. He tells them to go show themselves to the priests to prove they are physically clean and to initiate the rites of spiritual purification. Jesus shows compassion to those whom society avoided. All ten were made clean. Does Jesus begin a chain reaction of compassion?

Most of the lepers do as they are instructed. However one of them takes a slight detour. He does not go directly to the priest. Upon realizing he has been healed, he returns to thank Jesus. The one who returns is a Samaritan. This is not just an idle detail. Luke notices that the ultimate outsider is the only one that graciously disobeys Jesus' instructions. Kelly Derrick wonders, "A Samaritan leper – could life be any worse for him? And yet it is the outsider, the foreigner, who shows praise for being made well. It is the foreigner who turns back to give thanks – directly, openly, verbally – to Jesus. It is the foreigner who becomes the example of faith filled with joy and thanksgiving. Has the outsider continued the chain reaction by starting a chain reaction of joy, praise, and thanksgiving?"

Sometimes a simple act of kindness is all it takes to start a chain reaction. That is what Rachel Scott understood. What keeps us from drawing from this deep well of gratitude to act with mercy and compassion towards one another? In this story of the healed lepers, should it matter that the Samaritan was the one to outwardly show his gratitude to Jesus? The one who was made an outsider not only because of his illness but his place of birth, was the one Luke chose to mention as demonstrating gratitude. We do not know anything about the other men. Perhaps they returned at a later time. Perhaps they were so driven by their gratitude they went straight to the priest as they were instructed and then rejoiced all the way back to their villages and their newly restored lives. The point is not to wonder about the silent nine but to embrace the rejoicing one. The man who returned to thank Jesus started a chain reaction of joy, praise and thanksgiving because his story has been told and retold through the ages. He is set as an example of extravagant thanksgiving.

We can never underestimate the power of kindness or acceptance or compassion. We know what happens when our hearts become hardened, when we become intolerant and suspicious of others. All it takes to break these bonds of oppression is love, the very love that Jesus showed the ten lepers, the very love that God shows the exiles in Babylon, despite their difficult circumstances. Even when we find ourselves in a dark and challenging place, God invites us to meet that challenge with grace and faith. God calls us to rise above the darkness to become a light where there seems to be no light. God invites us to bloom where we are planted, no matter where that might be.

Perhaps all it really takes is one act of kindness to start a chain reaction. Could it really be that simple? My heart breaks for the families of Billy Lucas, Seth Walsh, Asher Brown, and Tyler Clementi. These four youth were all victims of anti-gay bullying and took their own lives in the month of September. Billy was a 15-year-old from Greensburg, Ind. who hung himself Sept. 9 from a barn rafter on his grandmother's farm. Seth Walsh, was 13 from Tehachapi, CA was removed from life support 10 days after hanging himself from a tree. He died Sept. 27. Asher Brown, a 13-year-old from Cypress, Texas, used his stepfather's gun to shoot himself on Sept. 17. Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old Rutgers University freshman, jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge spanning the Hudson River between New York and New Jersey on Sept. 22.

“Your actions can represent your character and your character can change someone else's life.” A life can be changed by one simple act of kindness just as easily as an act of deceit. Tyler Clementi took his own life when a personal encounter with a young man was videotaped on a webcam by his roommate and then broadcast on the web. Did his roommates not know that every human being is sacred? In order for the violence to stop, we must commit ourselves to do more than weep for the loss of these young people and have compassion for their family's grief. We must stand up and fight against bigotry. We must teach our children that it is not okay to bully anyone, our words are powerful and our actions can have dire consequences. Rachel Scott in her profound simplicity had it right. A simple act of kindness can start a chain reaction. Every child is worthy of our love and compassion. We must pray and work for a time when there are no more outsiders, when no family has to receive the awful news of a child's suicide.

It is a tragedy that any child would suffer in silence. It is heart wrenching that a child would feel such despair at such a young age that suicide seems like their only solution. It takes more than policies to create an environment of love and acceptance. Even when anti-bullying policies are in place, without effective implementation peers, teachers and other adults can still be intimidated into silence and inaction. Studies continue to tell us that this is more often than not the reality in the vast majority of our schools. Nine out of 10 youth that identify themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT) report being verbally harassed at school; 44 percent say they have been physically harassed; 22 percent report having been assaulted; and 60 percent say that when they report abuse, no one does anything to help or protect them. My heart aches to hear these statistics.

We seek to be a community that exhibits an extravagant welcome to everyone, a place of safety and dignity. Being Open and Affirming goes beyond a document we ratify and hang on the wall. It is a way of life. It is a faith commitment. It is the basis upon which we raise our children. All are welcome. All are cherished. All are loved. All are safe. There are no outsiders here. We are all met with the kind of love and compassion that Jesus always offered the stranger and outsider. We can start a chain reaction of love and compassion in what we say and how we treat each other. It is not easy. We are not able to sustain this commitment alone. We need God's help. Therefore through prayer and self reflection we recommit ourselves to this promise.

We don't love our neighbor or our enemy for that matter, expecting to receive their gratitude. We love others because we have been loved ourselves. When we have been truly transformed into the likeness of Christ, we become Christ-like. How do we allow the voices of greed, intolerance and hate to overpower the simple words of God's love for us? God's perfect love casts out fear! When we know we have been healed, that we have been renewed and recreated into the loving, compassionate person Jesus intends for us to be, we rejoice. We stop what we are doing and go straight to Jesus to express our joy. We start a chain reaction of gratitude and joy. For the sake of our children and the sacred communities in which we live, may it be so!

Amen

Source:

Faith Lens, October 6-12, 2010, "Rachel's Challenge," contributed by Kelly Derrick, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America website.