

EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE: A Sermon for World Mission Sunday 2008

The Rev. Martha P. Sterne

Episcopalians get it about glory.

- That the glory of God is the hidden flesh and blood truth about everybody everywhere.
- Therefore proclaiming the glory of the incarnation is the business we are in.
- Which is to say that we – every parish, diocese, province, person - are in the business of healing and feeding and serving and loving and respecting the dignity of every human being in God's glory-haunted world.

Anglicans have always gotten it about glory, at least on our better days. This is our charism – to know that glory is the deepest truth for everyone, everywhere. Glory is the wonder-filled transfiguring end of all people and all creation, not just a platitude to sing about or an unimportant side product of a guilt-ridden religion. I believe we live into that transfiguring glorious truth one particular person and place at a time.

This year my particular Mount Sinai, my particular glory place, is the International Community School in East Atlanta. Half of the kids are from red Georgia clay. And half of the kids are refugee children from every war torn country you can think of.

Here's what I saw the other afternoon. I don't know what was going on but it looked like some kind of glorious reverse Red Rover, Red Rover with two lines of kids facing each other across a beaten-down, bare-earth playground. The winter sun lit every little face – the glowing beauty of dark and dusky and pale and every shade on earth - for the children are from thirty plus countries. They were giggling in every language you can imagine and it was clear they understood each other. Every one was jumping up and down and flapping their arms enthusiastically like those guys that stand signaling in front of planes. Almost every shirttail was flapping, too.

The Bosnian former refugee teacher grinned and said again and again, “WONNNE, DOOOOO, TREEEEEE, and one child and then another raced towards the other line of kids who stood there cheering and clapping and calling him in until he joined them whooping and dancing and now somehow a part of the ‘other’ line. I couldn't figure out what the point of the game is since plain old American red rover, red rover is supposed to be about standing with your arms locked keeping the

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'other' out of your territory. But here – on this tiny campus for 350 children – here a dream for children of otherness has come true. In the dream of the International Community School, over and over you let the other in and it looks like everybody from everywhere wins. Glory be to God.

Here's the story of one of the people behind the transfigured Red Rover game.

My friend Barbara Thompson is a founder of the International Community School. I don't think there was this life plan in her from a long time ago to found a school for refugee kids. But what I know about her after long years of friendship is that she has these moments when the glory comes glimmering and she follows.

She started out as a freelance writer. For years she would do articles or books for people or businesses about some subject that they wanted to spread around. And she would go through her days – writing well and being a good citizen and friend and living a fairly useful and responsible life, an orderly writer's life. But every once in a while she would say to herself, you know I have this funny feeling. I think my life is smaller than I am. I just think my life is smaller than I am.

And somehow she got stuck on the story about what happens to kids in war – in Uganda I think maybe the first time or maybe Nicaragua. And that relentless and sickening eons old story just kept coming back and back - the brutality of family displacement and the maiming and killing of children in national and international power plays. The story just would not go away and it stayed in her head and troubled her at night and she would question why is the world like this? What possible reason could be right enough to have as a collateral the killing of children and the destruction of families and communities?

In the nineties she went to Bosnia while the war there was still raging chasing this same story of children of war. And when I first knew her, she was interviewing Bosnian refugee children and teenagers here in Georgia for a big national magazine article. She was working on a tight deadline on this article, and she had given her number to the kids she had interviewed in case they thought of anything else they wanted to say in the article. Sure enough, she was working and writing and working and writing and the phone rings. It is this young girl's troubled, soft voice twisting around the unfamiliar English and the girl says could you come meet my family? And Barbara says, well,

you see I'm working on this very important article – you know the one about Children of War - and so I'm very busy. I'm really very, very busy. And there was a pause, an intense quietness.

And somehow there was a moment. And a glory light glimmered. And Barbara knew to look up from her article and arise and follow the girl's invitation. She went to a dark little apartment, which some always-understaffed refugee resettlement organization had found for the family and then just left them there. Little food, one light, no table, no chairs, no bed, no extra clothes, the adults with no English – just a totally lost and demoralized Bosnian family - a grandmamma and a mama and a daddy and their little child and two teens – all of them sitting on the bare floor since there was no place else. And the writer sat there with them on the floor, even though you know she really had this deadline on this very important article to get done on Children of War. And they talked haltingly and they smiled together and something began to glow. She saw whatever it is we see in people that makes them real and deep and beautiful and worth troubling over. I believe it is that we see the glory of the face of Christ in them. And she made some calls on her cell phone and you know what happened.

The gifts came from her friends and her church, which happened to be my church at the time, gifts of furniture and food and light and love and friendship for the stranger, for the alien. You have seen the glory of this gifting in your church and your diocese. It happens everywhere through every one in the Episcopal church. You could name a dozen glowing moments in your own congregation and diocese. Surely that is the best reason why we join together.

Back to this particular story. From that one evening Barbara and her gang helped refugee family after family after family after family get on their feet and find jobs and even buy homes in this bountiful land, where almost all of us - except the ones who came in chains - come from some place that wasn't safe for us or where we weren't particularly wanted or needed.

The years went by and Barbara handed off the refugee resettlement ministry at our church though she kept the friends. And she went back to a simple, orderly writer's life. But every once in a while she had that little nagging thought again – I think my life is smaller than I am. And one night she went to Columbia Seminary to hear Walter Brueggemann, and the class was getting ready to start and there was one seat left in an auditorium of 120 seats and it was next to her. A man sat down and they

listened to one of Dr. Brueggemann's amazing lectures and they talked a little bit at the break. She found out that the man was the principal of one of our well-known private schools. And the break ended and they went back to listening to the lecture. When it was over the man went to head out one door and she headed toward another exit, and he turned around in the door and looked back at her and she looked at him and there was this glimmering moment.

What hidden possibilities of glory did they see to make these words tumble out? Barbara said, "By the way, if you are ever interested in starting a school for refugee children let me know." And Bill Moon said – standing backlit in an exit doorway on his way out – he said, "For twenty-five years I've been wanting to start a school for refugee children." And they looked at each other in the glow of the light of Christ. And their lives were transfigured in a dazzling moment of the eternal Yes.

And they did start a school – the International Community School. Kindergarten through sixth grade, an amazing place, with teachers from public schools and private schools and college volunteers, and adult refugees - classroom assistants who were dodging bombs and burying their dead all over the world in years gone by. Barbara and her chance companion and then a nun and then many others brought their histories together and their anguish for the children of the world and a new thing sprung forth. They knew that their love for children everywhere has to find its incarnation in some particular place with some particular children. And a miracle for refugee children and their families has happened in our city.

Because that's the way glory works isn't it? In a God-given moment that you didn't expect and couldn't have planned, your life opens up and up and out and out and you find yourself following the glimmering of some holy light to a glorious place you never knew - where you can give your gifts and receive the holy gifts of others - by the Love of God, through the Grace of Christ, in the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

You never know. There are these moments glowing with glorious possibility, of transfiguring power. For each of us if we will just notice. You never know when. You never know where. For though it is true, the glory of the Lord is everywhere, human beings need to see it somewhere in somebody in particular. And when we do see the glory of the Lord gleaming in somebody, then everybody else we see is has glorious possibilities as well. Amen.