

MDG Sunday, July 1, 2007

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Proper 8, Year C, BCP

1 Kings 19: 15-16, 19-21; Gal 5:1,13-25; Luke 9:51-62; Ps 16:5-11



When it became apparent that I'd be preaching today, as we celebrate and explore the Millennium Development Goals, I naively asked Cindy if I could choose the readings. There were certain parts of scripture that were echoing in my head, and I was hoping to use them to illustrate God's concern for the poor. But Cindy told me that the rubrics require that we stick with the lectionary, the prescribed readings for each week.

Still, I wasn't too worried. Just about any reading you choose from the Bible holds some material about God's call for global justice and reconciliation. It is written in the Law, handed down from on high in Exodus, where God calls for a sabbath year every seven years during which the land is allowed to rest and the poor are allowed to eat its produce. (Ex 23:11) It is heard in the Prophets, who time and time again call upon God's people to do justice, and to love mercy, to remember the widows and orphans. It is seen in the arms of our Savior, stretched wide upon the cross, to gather all of humanity to Himself.

And it is in his voice, days later, when he turns to Peter and asks, "Do you love me?... Feed my sheep... Tend my lambs... Tend my sheep." (John 15-17)

And it is in Jesus' revelation to John of the New Jerusalem, where the water of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb and where the tree of life yields leaves for the healing of the nations. (Rev 22:1-2)

God's concern for justice and reconciliation is all throughout scripture. So, no, I wasn't worried.

Then I saw today's readings. Here's Elijah throwing his mantle over Elisha who basically tells him, "Not right now, I'll join you later!" Here's Paul trying to straighten out those wayward Galatians by giving them a laundry list of do's and don'ts. And here's Jesus, walking through Luke's Gospel in a seemingly random collection of brief encounters, and sounding pretty irritable. Come to think of it, so do Paul and Elijah.

Where was I supposed to find justice and global reconciliation in that?

We'll come back to the readings. Today we're celebrating our parish's response to the Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs. Hopefully, everyone received a mailing with a commitment form this week. If you didn't there are plenty available on the table in the foyer. We're asking you to let

us know how you feel called to respond to the MDGs, and to place your form in the special baskets we have when you come up for communion.

To review, the Millennium Development Goals are eight goals, with specific targets and indicators that have been agreed to by 191 nations, including the US. Taken together, these goals address many of the most urgent needs of the developing world: to cut in half the number of people living on less than \$1 a day, to improve the chances for infants and their mothers, to give all children a chance to go to school, to stop the spread of HIV and malaria, and to do all this without destroying the environment, in partnership with one another, by the year 2015. Today finds us at the approximate midpoint of these targets. So how are we doing? Well, the story is mixed.

According to the most recent Millennium Development Goals Report issued by the United Nations,(i) Asia is making good progress when it comes to the percentage of people living on less than \$1 a day. There's been progress in almost every region when it comes to universal primary education, although boys are still more likely to have a chance to go to school than girls. More children are being vaccinated. Maternal health is being improved through better access to birth attendants. Women are being more politically empowered in almost every region, though they still lag behind men.

Other targets haven't progressed as well. Deforestation has slowed somewhat, but still continues at an unsustainable rate. Basic sanitation is available to more of the developing world, but it's not enough to meet the target. For the first time, most of the world population lives in urban areas. For the poor of the developing world, this means slums and for many of them, this means overcrowding, inadequate housing, and a lack of water and sanitation.

Sub-Saharan Africa continues to be the most difficult region in which to make progress. There, the number of victims of extreme poverty and child mortality actually rose. Sub-Saharan Africa, which holds about 10 percent of the world's population, is home to 64 percent of the world's HIV-positive people and about 90 percent of the world's HIV-positive children. Sub-Saharan Africa has the fastest growing number of tuberculosis cases.

Why is progress so spotty? There are plenty of reasons, some of which are political and some of which are practical. Official development assistance from developed countries - the donor nations - has increased steadily since 1997 and has now reached about one third of one percent. Half of the increases were due to debt relief. But debt relief doesn't necessarily translate into programs that will feed people or improve their chances to grow into all that God intended them to be. And emergency and disaster relief does not address long-term development needs.



In order to meet the MDG targets by their 2015 deadline, donor nations would have to contribute 0.7% of their gross national incomes. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (ii) in 2006 only five donor nations met that goal: Sweden, Luxembourg,

Norway, the Netherlands and Denmark. The US contributed 0.17%, according to the same report. Again, part of the reason is practical and part of it is political.

So if the nations of the world - the 191 who signed the Millennium Declaration - aren't fulfilling their commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, why should we, as Christians? The Christian heart, when it listens to God's still, small voice, can perform miracles. It is much more nimble than any nation, and steadfast enough to weather any political wind.

It isn't hard to imagine these goals as Christ's goals. After all, didn't Jesus feed the multitudes? Well, that's Goal 1. Didn't he teach everyone, caring for children and their mothers, acknowledging women as whole people? That's Goals 2 through 5. Didn't he heal the sick? Doesn't he continue to sustain his creation? And, if it's a global partnership you want, Jesus invented it!

So it's pretty easy to hear the voice of Jesus in these goals. If this is one way in which he continues to call us to help the poor and hopeless, then it doesn't really matter what the donor nations do. Because each and every Christian heart has to choose how to answer God's call. And that, in fact, is what today's readings are all about. For Elisha, the answer in the end was to slaughter his oxen, burn his equipment, give the food to those he left behind and take off after Elijah. For members of the Galatian churches, there was pressure to turn back to Jewish practices, forfeiting the freedom that they had received through Christ. They had heard the call, but maybe it was fading, or maybe the pressures of daily life were distracting them from answering.



And in today's Gospel, there are several calls. Those who are preoccupied with obligations and social niceties aren't going to slow Jesus down from his goal. He'll reach Jerusalem with or without them. But their response indicates their level of commitment, to him and to the kingdom of God.

What about us? Can we hear the voice of Jesus in the one billion people who live on less than \$1 a day? Can we see his face in the 30,000 children who will die needlessly by this time tomorrow? Nobody's saying you have to slaughter your oxen and burn their yoke. But it's easy to recognize \$1 a day as a paltry sum until you realize that it's 0.7% of a \$52,000 per year salary, and that someone's asking you to give it away.

I want to leave you with two final thoughts. To your left is the paper chain "prayer shawl" that our youth group made during their 30-hour famine. They assembled 10,000 paper links to represent 10,000 of the children who died from hunger that day. The banner was taken down for Maundy Thursday and, when it was rehung, it had suffered some damage.

You can see there are a couple of gaps in it. I thought it was a shame - it's really a beautiful work of art - but then it hit me: wouldn't it be wonderful if we could take it apart completely? Wouldn't it be great if, day by day, we could reduce the number of children dying needlessly and, day by day, take some of those links off until finally this banner was completely dismantled?

We have a banner hanging opposite the "Prayer Shawl." It's the "Mosaic Law" banner that we assembled as a congregation during Lent 2004. We don't normally have it up this time of year, but I wanted it today, not only because it echoes Paul's statement to love your neighbor as yourself - that appears around the border - but also because, if the Prayer Shawl is the call, then this banner is the answer. Jesus calls to us in the voices of the poor, the uneducated, the weak, the hungry and the oppressed. But he also provides us with the answer, to love one another as he loved us. Will we hear his call today? And, having heard, will we answer?

Amen