

C. Henry Oratorical Contest

Hold On, Together

March 25, 2011

Jessica Sarriot

I woke up this morning still white, still wealthy, and still privileged. I woke up knowing that by a pure coincidence of biology, I was not born in an inner city surrounded by drugs, guns and a high probability of ending up in the prison system. I was not born in Gaza, Darfur, or Libya. I was born as part of the elite of the Western world. I wear clothes made by slave labor, eat food made cheap by corporate exploitation, and consume five times more than most people in the world. On a typical morning I can walk by the Maplewood construction site and read “Caterpillar” on the side of a backhoe and *know* that Palestinians I’ve met have had lives and homes destroyed partially because of that company’s involvement in the Occupation. I can step onto the elliptical machine at the gym, use electricity to work off energy from calories I don’t need and watch six TVs tuned to different channels. By 9 am my brain is often a scrambled mess of consumer culture, American imperialism, media monopolies, violence, wealth disparities and an endless chorus of “your fault, your fault, can’t do anything about it, your fault.”

Clearly, it can get overwhelming; it can feel like every single action is an opportunity for guilt, to the point where it’s easy to forget that following Jesus is about life to the fullest, pressed down, overflowing; about love, mercy and joy; encountering the Kingdom of God in such a beautiful way that one can’t help but say “I was blind, but now I see!”

We are all living in a globalized, information-rich world. Daily, we’re asked to care about issues that our grandparents never needed to worry about. We’re not only more aware, but actually more complicit, and yet completely unable to engage every issue as thoroughly as we should. We physically, mentally and emotionally can’t.

So what do we do? How do we live without getting paralyzed or drowning in a sea of guilt?

The most helpful answer I’ve found is responsiveness. Responsiveness to each other opens the door not only to real engagement, but also to remembering who we are as the body of Christ. Today I’m addressing myself to those of you who are fighting for a

cause, and are exhausted, or frustrated; and also those of you who perhaps are not, who feel like the political/activist scene is just not your style; to both sides I want to say—we are in this together.

We are in this together, but sometimes we have a hard time hearing each other, This communication break often springs from a differentiated sense of urgency and priority. In the Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. addresses those criticizing him for pushing too hard, wanting too much too fast. After listing the accumulative weight of injustice the African American community has endured he expresses the hope that his audience will understand his “legitimate and unavoidable impatience”. It is a feeling many today share. Ask a Palestinian living under occupation, a gay boy being bullied, or an African American mother whose sons are in jail and whose daughters are getting sub-par education if what they need is more patience, more time for others to become educated and gain awareness of their plight, or if what they need is justice *today*, my guess is they would answer the latter. They, like the persistent widow in Luke 18 continue to knock, continue to demand justice even as they are consistently told to wait until their pain is politically ripe, or denominationally understood.

Those of us who’ve walked with these people, have internalized the truth that their suffering is ours as well, often come back to our home communities feeling like Isaiah—to others we often look judgmental, ranting, desperate and slightly distasteful outside of a desert setting. Like Isaiah, we’re probably right about the various causes we’re passionate about. We probably should be biking to work, buying fair trade or local ware as much as possible, reforming immigration law, restructuring the Security Council, implementing restorative justice, divesting from the Israeli Occupation. But if we are going to accomplish any of our goals, and stay grounded in the reason behind all of them, we need each other.

The importance of responsiveness can best be illustrated by the story of my roommate Sara and I. We knew we would be friends the first day we met: she was as fascinated that I lived in Jerusalem, as I was that she lived in Holmes County, Ohio. Although our personalities match up in a rather uncanny fusion of energy, Sara and I have very different backgrounds and entirely different areas of passion. Sophomore year I

planned an event aimed at raising awareness about the Israeli Occupation; it was all I thought about that week. I was so eager for others on campus to finally understand the urgent need for Palestinian rights. I remember passing Sara on the way to the cafeteria and her telling me she was sorry but she had something else to do over that time and couldn't make it. I was devastated. I couldn't even explain it to her. I just went home, cried, and wrote an email to my Palestinian friend saying "If I can't even get my own roommate to care, how am I going to get anyone else to?"

Those first two years were a long learning process for both of us; and I know we both hurt and misinterpreted the other many times. I can remember talking about depression, eating disorders, and cutting in an embarrassingly callous way. I knew as little about the societal reasons and wide-reaching effects of many mental health problems as Sara did about the Occupation; our mutual ignorance led us to a kind of "which is worst?" competition which helped no one. Two years and many a conversation later, we have become each others' allies, support, and in many ways fellow advocates. We still have our own passions, but we have learned to be responsive to the passion of another, as well.

I needed Sara. I needed her to understand the injustice of the Occupation, and the ways in which we need to respond to that in a theological and, yes, political way. But I also needed Sara to remind me of why it mattered; that the goal wasn't really justice for the sake of justice but justice for the sake of love. I needed her to teach me what she knew, to remind me that, as MLK once put it, we are caught up in an "inescapable network of mutuality".

My favorite scene in *The Brothers K*, by David James Duncan, illustrates for me what being Christ's body and living in the Kingdom of God look like, as well as the rewards of responsiveness. One of the brothers is imprisoned in a mental health facility, undergoing electroshock therapy. The military and hospital system are both against the family reclaiming their son and the only action the mother has been able to take is to rally a small group of misfits from Church, her alcoholic brother and remaining children and drive

a thousand miles south in a rickety bus to somehow free her son. As the narrator, Kincaid, describes his feelings while watching this strange caravan preparing to leave this way:

“ We were headed for an insane asylum in California. We looked more as if we’d escaped from one. But in the pouring gray rain, I felt clarity. With the war still raging, I felt peace. With Papa in despair, Everett in prison and Irwin in the asylum, I felt release. I didn’t understand my feelings, didn’t even desire them really, but they kept filling me so full that my eyes began to well.”

What links everyone on that bus is their responsiveness. No matter their age, stance on war, mental health, or the Establishment, they are brought together by their willingness to be moved, physically and figuratively, by the cry of another. When we do that, when we live awake and responsive to others, seeing allies and opportunities, taking mad leaps at the light barely seen through the darkness, we are rewarded.

Tonight I want to conclude by saying to you what Kincaid figures out while watching his fellow travelers prepare for a seemingly hopeless journey, what he whispers to his brother, Irwin, locked in an asylum. I leave this as a prayer for the activists, for those who have been too disheartened or jaded to act, a prayer for you as you hear the cries, feel overwhelmed, and decide to respond anyway

Listen:

“Pain and sorrow never end. Nothing we do is enough. It’s always been this way. “But joy”, I whispered to Irwin. ‘This joy. It’s boundless too, and endless. So hold on. This isn’t theirs to knock out of you. It’s not yours to lose. It’s not mine either. But it’s making the trip. It’s coming. So please. Just hold on.”

Sources:

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