

Protagonist Corner

All These We Have Done: The Church and a World of Hungers

~~Mercy Oduyoye~~

~~Institute of Women in Religion and Culture~~

~~Trinity Theological Seminary, Accra, Ghana~~

We have thrown a lifeline to struggling people.

We have accompanied refugees and clothed the naked.

We have shelters for the homeless and for battered women.

We have soup kitchens in our churches.

We are serious about multicultural living.

We are working for the inclusion of those who are “different.”

We have retreats to listen to what God would have us do.

All these we have done.

For eight weeks in the fall of 2002, I had the privilege of being in the Campbell Seminar, which focused on the subject, “The Mission of the Church in a World of Hungers.” Time and again as I struggled with the theme of the seminar, I thought about preachers in my home country of Ghana and about preachers in the U.S. The seminar was sponsored by Columbia Theological Seminary where there are perhaps many hungers but certainly not hunger for food. On visits off the campus, however, I encountered two other worlds engaged in addressing the hunger of the poor and the homeless: the Open Door Community with its service to the homeless of Atlanta, and local churches with their food banks, soup kitchens, and night shelters. Seeing what Christians were already doing in this country, I felt at a loss to answer the question posed by some Christians in this country: “What should we be doing about the poor and the hungry?”

I remember the man in Matthew 19:16-22. He asks Jesus, “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” The response was that if you want to enter into the state of “comprehensive well-being,” keep the commandments. (“Comprehensive well-being” is the language of Klaus Nürnberger in *Prosperity, Poverty and Pollution: Managing the Approaching Crisis*.) When I look at the programs of churches and at several hospitality centers for the hungry and the homeless, I ask myself: “What more could the Christians and all the good people of this country be doing?” And then when I look at what we are able to do at home in Ghana, it seems an affront to be raising questions with those who are already doing so much here. So what I want to address in this Protagonist Corner is what the worldwide church could be doing about the poor and the hungry. The only reason I attempt to speak on the subject is that we all know well enough that charity is not enough. While we must continue with acts of charity, we must also team up and speed up the search for alternatives to the present systems that produce poverty and hunger. Murphy Davis of the Open Door Community reminds us, even as she is busy feeding the hungry, that “to serve the poor and not confront the injustice of the system that causes poverty and oppression is ultimately to insult the poor and to denigrate the presence of God among us.”¹

The rich inquirer in the gospel event did not ask Jesus, “Who are the poor?” He

~~knew who the poor were. And we too know who the poor are—at least we should, for we have tons of literature on the poor and on poverty.~~

The rich inquirer did not trouble Jesus any further. He knew he was not going to follow the outrageous recommendation given by Jesus. Maybe this rich inquirer had done a careful social and theological analysis about why he was rich and others were poor, and he didn't see anything he could do about the problem. But there was another inquirer who followed through and asked: "And who is my neighbor?"

Christians and their organizations in this country have accompanied the needy at home and abroad. It has not been easy—I can ~~tell from the fundraising efforts.~~ Sometimes people have asked: "~~Why should we join efforts with people as far away as Ghana? We have hungry people on our own doorsteps.~~" Other people have questions about their neighbors on their doorsteps. To address such questions it is good to visit again and again the familiar text of Matthew 25:31-46. And we should also look at Isaiah 52:6-7, which says in effect: "True faith is to give both oneself and God no rest until the world is whole again."²

Can we still say, "All these things—all these commandments—we have done"? Until the earth enjoys comprehensive well-being, our work is not done. We are called to act on agricultural and trade policies that leave some with no harvest and others with more than they can eat. Instead of producing food for its local population, Brazil produces soya beans for export to the U.S. and Europe where they are used to fatten cattle.³ Cameroonian farmers were once ordered to pull out their not-yet-ripe millet crop, which is their food staple, and to plant cotton for export. Such are the unjust ways of our present system that produces hunger among so many. Jean-Marc Ela narrates in *My Faith as an African* the ways these unjust systems operate. Both rich and poor countries are enmeshed in a world trade that takes from the poor to enrich the already rich.

The whole world has become a neighborhood, and the sooner we live as one community, the better for our generation, our posterity, and the earth itself. Community is no easy buzzword: it implies conflicts to be resolved; it implies generating a sense of belonging and the space for one to participate fully with one's peers.

In the Campbell Seminar—with six of us from abroad and two from the U.S.—we have been engaged for eight weeks in intense deliberations about what it means to hunger and about the implications of such hungers for the mission of the church in the twenty-first century. People seek many things; they hanker after and yearn for and desire many things. Hungers—physical, spiritual, and psychological—are often deeply intertwined with one another. The seminar has seen how some hungers and the projects they stimulate have brought and continue to bring death to many.

Some people hunger for acceptance. They have been excluded—we have so many reasons for excluding others—and their exclusion has stimulated in some the hunger for inclusion. Their hungers lead them to yearn for justice, reconciliation, right living, and peace. Such hungers are often in the churches with their divisions and exclusive clubs. So it is not surprising that many hunger for the unity in diversity that is the body of Christ.

We all have hungers that we need to acknowledge and try to deal with. My hunger is that the church worldwide will live actively as Christ for the world. In Pauline language, the church should cater to the parts of God's creation and God's people who are considered to be the unseemly parts. These who are considered the "unseemly

parts” of creation and of God’s people call for the church’s special care and attention. Christians must be in active solidarity with the Christ-presence—the poor, the hungry, the “unseemly”—in their immediate neighborhoods. But Christians, especially in the rich lands of the north, must also be in active solidarity with the poor and the hungry in Ghana, Iraq, North Korea, the Caribbean, and South America. Rich Christians do not have to sell all that they have and give it to the poor. But they are called to let go of the abundance, the excess, and the waste they can afford to generate because the rest of the world feeds them.

Yes, Christians of the U.S. have done “all this” in acts of generous charity. But you still stand accused, as did the rich inquirer who came to Jesus. Indeed, we all stand accused because what we can see around us tells us that our reality falls short of God’s intentions. What shall we do to approximate God’s reality that is eternal life and to make the world a place where God reigns? God has given us the authority to do this, for after all, God acts through history, and history is humanity in action. What we lack, it seems to me, is the humility to acknowledge that there are other human beings who are co-inheritors of the earth and that the earth cannot support our self-centered greed.

Where then are you to start as you seek to move beyond the “all this” which you have done? One place to start is to ask: “What are my hungers as a preacher? How do these hungers shape and inform my preaching? What are the real hungers of my congregation, and how do these hungers inform my congregation’s understanding of its purpose and mission? What are the hungers of the world, and how are these hungers intertwined with my hungers and the hungers of my congregation? And how does the gospel provide us with the bread of life?”

Notes

¹Peter R. Gathje, ed. *A Work of Hospitality: Open Door Community* (Atlanta: The Open Door Community, 2002), 210.

²Klaus Nürnberger, *Prosperity, Poverty and Pollution: Managing the Approaching Crisis* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1999), 161.

³*Ibid*, 129.