

June 8, 2008

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 5 (Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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Some of you may remember a year or so ago when I mentioned my friend Robin Denney and her missionary work in Liberia. I want to share another of Robin's stories with you this morning, this time from El Salvador where she visited her sister, also an Episcopal missionary.

I've never been to El Mozote, so I'm going to let you hear this in Robin's words. I have edited out the most intense details. She writes:

We visited El Mozote, the site of what is considered the worst massacre in modern Latin America. More than 1,000 unarmed men women and children were rounded up on December 11, 1981, they were separated and tortured, and then all of them were murdered. The youngest victim was only 3 days old.

Much of the world, including the United States, believed the massacre to be propaganda and refused to investigate. It wasn't until 1990, when human rights groups began a project to exhume the mass graves, that the truth of this massacre was finally recognized.

We arrived in El Mozote expecting to find a ghost town, but El Mozote is alive again. The family members of the dead, who had fled to Honduras before the massacre, had returned to rebuild. Bomb craters still litter the fields, and there are still houses that are in ruins, but there are also new houses and fresh coats of paint. There is a monument to the dead, which has the names of those whose bodies were positively identified. The church, where they killed the children, had been burned down. But the people of El Mozote have since built a new church. I have never seen such a church. On one side there is a mural of the history and culture of the town. The other side of the church is dedicated to the children. It has an incredible mosaic, with children dancing and playing. Along the bottom of the church are the names and ages of all the children. And all around there is a garden with flowers of all different colors, roses, and benches and paths, all beautifully, lovingly tended.

The beauty of El Mozote is in those who live, and what they have chosen to do with their grief. They have poured love over these gaping wounds. Wounds where loved ones were violently ripped away from them. They have poured love over broken, burned, and bloodstained ruins. And over mass graves they have planted gardens of love. The violence, the pain, the loss, the evil of it all cannot be washed away. But Love somehow has conquered it.

In our Gospel today, we are introduced to a woman who has been suffering for years, well over a decade, with some sort of bleeding disease, probably a menstrual hemorrhage. In addition to the physical maladies that stem from such a condition, she

was also saddled with a social and ritual stigma that rendered her a pariah. She was, like so many of our most compelling biblical characters, an outcast.

And, like so many of our most compelling biblical characters, she possesses a courage that far surpasses her brief mention in our Scriptures. Faith, yes, of course, faith just as Jesus pointed out, that leads to the reality of her healing. But she had, above all, courage to act upon that faith.

It was courage that sustained her through the painful walk through the crowd that surrounded him.

It was courage that steadied her hand as she reached it out.

The courage, for this unnamed woman was not only the courage to put herself in harm's way, or the courage to touch someone she was legally forbidden to touch, but even more, she had the courage to put her faith to the test. She believed in this rogue teacher, this miracle-worker, this rabble rouser. She believed that he was who he said he was. And she had the courage to put her actions where her faith resided. She risked being proved wrong. She risked not only a stoning, or jail but even worse, she risked learning that that in which she believed was simply not true, that he was just a teacher or just a troublemaker. Or just a fake.

But her courage sustained her even through the possibility that her faith might be shaken.

It takes a lot of faith to be a Christian. We have, after all, all of these mysteries: the Trinity, the virgin birth, the Resurrection, eternal life and unconditional love. They do not, any of them, make logical sense, but through faith, we accept them as part of a larger reality that sustains us through the other things that don't make sense either: famines, hurricanes, and a country church burning to the ground full of dead children.

In addition to that faith, though, we need courage to take our faith out into this world that doesn't make any sense.

The people of the rebuilt town of El Mazote have courage in spades.

Like the woman in our Gospel whose courage was an ultimate test of her faith, the people of El Mazote came back to a town full of ghosts and ruins and bones. It was a place once of homes and families but had become a place of blood and death. They came back to a place where evil had won and, with unsurpassed courage, made it a place where the Gospel will be preached again and again. El Mazote will never again be a place associated with joy, but it will, by God and by grace, be a place associated with love and triumph. And courage.

For what do you need courage? Where are you scared of acting on your faith? Where is it that you cannot go, what is it that you cannot do because of ghosts or stigma?

In order to live a life of, as Geoffrey puts it, "ultimate integrity," or, as I put it, a life of "faith lived out loud," we must have, in addition to a deep and abiding faith, a God-supported courage that can drive us well beyond what we believe is possible by human rules.

With faith we can indeed move mountains, but only if we have the courage to start pushing.

In our post-Communion prayer at every Eucharist, we pray to God: "Grant us strength and courage to love and serve the Lord." With that courage granted, we, like the bleeding woman pushing her way through the crowd to Jesus, and like the people of El Mazote, dispel evil and replace it with hope.