

Getting Goosebumps

February....

Rev. Sarah Campbell

A confession: ten years ago, in any place but church, I had a hard time clearly enunciating the word Christian. I'd mumble it. Now I say it boldly, and with pride. Something has changed. I wonder how it is with you.

One of my most dog eared books, to the point where some of the ears are falling off, is Diana Butler Bass book [A People's History of Christianity](#). It's about the largely untold story of ordinary Christians. Hundreds of years before there were creeds defining what a Christian must believe, there were communities of Christians that differed theologically but they all had one thing in common: their care for "the least of these". For the first 300 years it wasn't about doctrinal belief. It was about the transformative power of love. The trinity didn't matter to them. Hospitality did. And the movement grew. People were drawn to these early Christian communities not because of some promise of an afterlife if they believed the right way, but because of what they observed and felt when they entered these Christian gatherings. Christian hospitality was unlike anything they'd ever experienced. It was wide and deep and real and subversive. It was of God, not of the empire. The African theologian Tertullian wrote this in 200 ce: "It is our care of the helpless, our practices of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of our opponents. Only look, they say, look how they love one another."

Gives you goosebumps...

Usually at the margins of society and sometimes under political duress, the earliest Christians "did risky, compelling, good things that helped people." And they could do more together than they could do alone. And it gave them joy in life to be about this work. Christian groups extended hospitality to the sick, the poor, widows, orphans, slaves, prostitutes, and the dying. They brought food, medicines, and companionship to prisoners forced to work in mines, banished to prison islands, or held in jail. They bought coffins and dug graves to bury the criminals, whose corpses otherwise would lie unburied beyond the city walls. In 165, a plague ravaged cities and towns throughout the Roman Empire, killing 1/3 of the population. (Pagels) Everyone fled but Christians who shocked their pagan neighbors by staying to care for the sick and dying. Imagine hearing this scripture read for the very first time in order to feel the power of this new morality as Jesus' early followers must have felt it: "For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Matthew)

I wonder why I get goosebumps when I hear these stories about the earliest Christians. It's not just intellectual curiosity about church history. There's that too. But this is something different. It's an emotional reaction. A kind of deep recognition.... through the distance of time.... We're like you...You're like us... You're ours... We're yours...

I got the same emotional reaction, goosebumps, two weeks ago when I heard Paulo Naso from our partner Italian denomination speak to a dozen clergy in Mpls. He told us about what his small protestant denomination is doing in Italy right now as the refugee crisis intensifies in the Mediterranean-- the desperate human beings.... the growing xenophobia.... the locking down of borders. It was so moving. I wanted him to come and tell you the story-- this Mediterranean guy is spending his sabbatical in MN this Jan and Feb, enjoying winter-- but this week end he is on our border learning about *our* refugee crisis.

For Paolo's people, it all started on Oct 3rd 2013 when 368 refugees died off the coast of Lampedusa, an island in Italy that is only 70 miles from Tunisia. Soon after, this little protestant Italian denomination founded in 12th century, the Waldensians, went there to learn. Then they prayed to discern what they might do. Then they created Mediterranean Hope, later partnering with a larger Italian catholic community St. Egidio, to grow their capacity and influence. Mediterranean Hope is creatively and courageously and brilliantly responding to this time in human history with the massive flow of climate refugees. The story of the Mediterranean Sea is so similar to the story of the Sonoran desert. Even the found objects of those who have perished are the same, a bible, a water bottle wrapped in burlap, toothbrush. Because everything is in flux, Mediterranean Hope is a multi-layered, nimble organization which is always needing money, volunteers, and strong supporters, because sometimes civil disobedience is required. These Waldensians do everything from maintaining a hospitality center for recent refugees; to working with governments in creating a "humanitarian corridor"-- identifying who, paying their way, and supporting them once they cross over--; to volunteering on a rescue boat. Fewer and fewer European NGOs are doing these rescues because it's become criminalized, the rescuing, but still some Waldensians go out on boats to rescue desperate humans who would perish at sea otherwise. The Waldensians were concerned about whether their global partners would continue to support them, to have their back, when they needed to do this civil disobedience. Paolo said the UCC was right there immediately, supporting them and it meant the world to them.

Goosebumps again... I could hardly believe he was sitting right here in Minneapolis telling us this story. Not just an interesting story about people way over there, but somehow again, there was an emotional reaction, a kind of deep recognition... We're like you... You're like us... You are ours... We are yours...

And then there is our story... Where do we begin? Of course the roots go way down, way back. There are so many pieces to the story of Mayflower's immigrant welcoming... so much prayer, so many volunteer hours, so much money, so much support, we have one another's back...

So let us remember our story. Like the Waldensians, we could do no other because we've been fed these same Bible stories since we were babies. What's more, we learn these stories together in community, so it's no wonder....

That we housed a refugee family in a little house next to the parking lot... that we partnered with Beacon, moved that little house and replaced it with a big building with 30 apartments, home primarily to first gen immigrants from Somalia.... That three nights a week we tutor thereby deepening our relationship with our neighbors.... That we created an early childhood center for these families and more, now 100 mixed income families, including many first gen immigrants... And then there's our immigration team... you are amazing and creative and nimble—through you, we give homes and food to asylum seekers visit undocumented immigrants in detention, support sanctuary churches, take human rights action trips to the border, speak and organize all over the state and country about immigration policy and the US role in destabilizing many nations ... Three months ago this church rose to the challenge and we increased our pledges in order to support more immigrants and asylum seekers and the foundation gave a matching grant... Now I know that personal stories are the most moving... But you'll need to imagine the personal story of each of the immigrants this congregation has supported, fed, housed, befriended. Hundreds of human beings. And you'll need to imagine, or maybe you know, how much joy and blessing those of us have received while doing these acts of Christian hospitality.

The story continues. Intensifies.... Soon Susie George will move to the border for a spell to work on our behalf. When she returns in about three months, she'll have ideas about what's next.... And the youth will be going to the border this summer on their mission trip. What will they expect of us when they return? How will Mayflower, they'll ask, use our money, our time, maybe our building to welcome the stranger?

Oh Mayflower... a lot has happened in the last ten years. We don't know what's going to happen in the next ten. Do you get goosebumps wondering? You should!

The world is changing fast.... Climate disruption. Climate refugees. Massive migration. Fast changing racial, ethnic, and religious demographics. How do we respond to all of this change? We are Christians. We are deeply rooted like a tree beside water and in all that we do, we will give life. We are creative. We are courageous. We refuse to be paralyzed by the news. We've been teaching our children the same stories that we learned and they will teach their children. Together we'll sing: "we're gonna treat everybody right". So we will. Even if it takes risk and sacrifice, that's what we'll do. Lots of treating everybody right and we'll do it together. And it will bring us such meaning and hope.

Dirk Ficca, our speaker today, former head of the World Parliament of Religions, knows the shadow side of the Christian story, what bad things have been done in the name of Christ; but still there's something else that's true and he's been seeing it more and more recently as he travels to refugee camps all around the world, witnessing unspeakable suffering and witnessing awe inspiring acts of loving kindness. He said to me recently: Sarah, I've never been prouder to be a Christian". Goosebumps again.

I confess. I couldn't be a Christian if I had to be creedal, to believe a certain set of beliefs. But I'm so glad I *am* a Christian because of what we're about in the world. Rescuing desperate people from the sea and the desert. Again, in the words of Tertullian in 200 CE "It is our care of the helpless, our practices of loving kindness that brands us...."

Let us pray: Oh God, sink our roots deep, deeper still in you that we might ever give life to others as this world changes utterly. Amen.

Sources

Butler Bass, [A Peoples History of Christianity](#), HarperCollins, 2001.

Pagels, Elaine, [Beyond Belief](#), Random House, 20013.

Mediterranean Hope, look up online.

