

2010 Global Mission Lenten Series Reflection for the Fourth Week in Lent

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Luke 9:10-17

“And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.” Luke 9:16-17

*We have always existed, like drops of water,
essential and necessary, but forgotten.
But we believe that if we think, if we talk, if we write,
our words will be like blows
a fist against concrete walls that absorb the noise,
a muted explosion that becomes a shout.
No longer a lament of anguish or complaint,
but a battle cry of protest and desire to be seen
and heard.*

– From the poem “Distintas” (Different)
by Rosa Quintanilla

I met Rosa Quintanilla, a woman from a poor, urban neighborhood in Santiago, Chile when she overrode her husband’s objections to join the first community health team trained by EPES back in 1982. EPES (*Educación Popular en Salud*) was founded during Chile’s years of military dictatorship, as a project of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile (IELCH) to promote justice and dignity in health care for the poor.

Physically and psychologically destroyed by the twin disasters of the brutal military dictatorship and an abusive marriage, Rosa was fearful and distraught. “I knew I had to change my life,” she said, “but I didn’t have the confidence to try. Becoming a health promoter started a whole cascade of effects: I gained confidence in myself, in my ability to accomplish things. As my confidence grew, so did my relationships with other people, which in turn increased my confidence.”

When I met Rosa it was not immediately apparent to me who she was --another member of the world’s poor who live in every country and are invisible to most of us who live within the comforts of the middle class world. We don’t hear her opinions about poverty, Free Markets, or military interventions on CNN or CBS. The media generally broadcasts the voices of rich and powerful.

Over the years, I have had the privilege to come to know who Rosa Quintanilla is and how her tremendous leadership, courage and commitment have continually shaped the lives of her family and her community. I have so many rich memories of times I spent with her. I remember being in her small wooden house one rainy, cold winter afternoon, talking about what a tough time she was having making enough money to feed her four kids, when a neighbor stopped by and asked for food. Without hesitation, Rosa went to her refrigerator that contained only a few eggs, a pad of butter and some vegetables and put half of what she had in a basket and gave it to her neighbor.

Another time during the military dictatorship, I was driving home and had to make a quick exit off the main road because there were barricades, military tanks and tear gas everywhere. I was close to Rosa’s house so I drove there and we spent two hours on the floor of the house with her kids trying to protect everyone from the paralyzing tear gas and the shooting by the military going on outside.

I thought of Rosa and the hundreds of other amazing shantytown women we have worked with over the years when I recently read an article about Pulitzer prize winners and New York Times columnist, Nick Kristof and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn's book, Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide.

In the book, they argue that the central moral challenge of this century is gender inequity. Gender inequity that is reflected in a brutality against women and girls that is staggering: violence against women, sex trafficking, the huge burden of maternal mortality--every minute somewhere in the world a woman dies in childbirth—bride burnings and mass rape. The authors also show in their book, however, that the, “world is awakening to a powerful truth - women are not the problem, they are part of the solution.” Increasingly, throughout the world, programs aimed at women and girls – health, education and microfinance – have shown to be the most effective in fighting poverty.

Her calm on that day made people feel safe in a time of great insecurity, terror and political repression. Not even a high school graduate, Rosa's keen intelligence, excellent technical abilities and amazing organizing skills made her a key leader of the community health teams.

When I read the scripture lesson for today I immediately thought of Rosa and the community health promoters. The feeding of the five thousand is one of the most well known parables and the only one repeated in all four gospels. I had heard it hundreds of times by the time I moved to Chile in 1981. But I remember so distinctly the first time I heard a sermon about it in the setting of the shantytown church where I was a member. I remember being surprised to learn that the actual number of people present that afternoon was probably closer to 15,000 because, as the young Chilean pastor explained, Matthew's account of the feeding of the 5,000 ends by saying, “And those who ate numbered 5,000 men, not counting the women and children.” I remember seeing the poor women in the community shake their heads knowingly at this news - they were so used to not being counted or, more accurately, simply not counting.

My second surprise was to hear an interpretation I had never heard before (this was in the early 80s) that the real miracle that happened that day was that Jesus convinced all those who were present to reach into their pockets and share what food they had brought with them. That in a crowd of hungry people in which there didn't seem to be enough food – a young boy stepped forward to share and suddenly there was more than enough. Hearing this interpretation sitting in a shantytown that was facing massive unemployment and hunger had a profound impact on me. An understanding of the scripture that emphasized sharing and community made perfect sense in this setting. We know that the intolerable hunger in the world is not due to scarcity – it is a question of justice and sharing.

For the first time in history, our generation has the tools, technology, and resources to end hunger and extreme poverty - yet what we are lacking is the political will. If people would share there would be enough to go around for the more than 1.4 billion people living on less than US\$1.25 a day —the majority of whom are women. I thought of Rosa opening her refrigerator to share with her neighbor despite her own needs. When Jesus blessed the loaves and fishes they multiplied

and there was enough for everyone. In uncertain times like these, when the financial crisis is forcing people to leave their homes, lose their jobs and worry about the future – it is not the time to hide what is in our pockets but a time to share. God takes the small gifts we have and makes great things out of them.

Moving back to Chile a few months ago, after having lived here for most of the 1980s and 1990s, has been a wonderful reconnection to the work of EPES, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile and to Rosa and many other health promoters. I recently visited Rosa in her home that she and her daughters and son built some years ago. It is brightly painted and creatively decorated by her and her daughters.

Today, Rosa works in a shelter for battered women, is a community leader and a member of the EPES Board of Directors. Her daughters, who grew up going with her to many health workshops and community activities, are all teachers. Participating in a community health team had an additional benefit for Rosa: “Through my participation, I rediscovered my ability to write and realized I had something valuable to say.” Her book, *Yo Soy Pobladora*, about the lives of shantytown women, has been used as a college textbook.

And while it is true that Rosa is an exceptional woman, in God’s sight all people are exceptional. In the slums, favelas, reservations, shantytowns, refugee camps and squatter’s settlements live millions of exceptional women and children waiting for an opportunity to develop and share their gifts and talents. As Rosa states so beautifully in her poem - they have always existed, like drops of water, essential and necessary but forgotten and waiting to be seen and heard.

In this Lenten season, let us make a commitment to be alert to the powers that diminish, oppress, cause poverty and destroy life. Let us share our gifts and let them be multiplied. Today we are well aware that the relationship between churches and communities in the North and South is not one of ‘giver and receiver’ but rather equal companios in God’s mission. Accompaniment - a term that emerged from Latin America - expresses well the new model for mission – walking together with Rosa and others in a common cause of justice and service to humanity.

For the past 28 years, the ELCA Global Mission-supported EPES health ministry has been helping low-income women and their families develop skills for collective action. At the core of EPES’ strategy has been a program to train and accompany community health teams in poor neighborhoods. Groups of 10 to 15 women receive technical and practical knowledge in health promotion from a holistic perspective that examines how underlying social, economic and environmental factors influence individual and community well being. The teams work with neighborhood associations, schools, clinics, city government and coalitions around projects that mobilize local resources to achieve change. Community health teams confront issues from respiratory infections to violence against women to HIV/AIDS.

The Evangelical Lutheran in Chile (IELCH) is also deeply committed to serving and empowering women and children through its daycare centers in poor communities and more recently its shelters for women and their children who have been victims of violence. In a world of increasing social inequality, many times the church is the only group interested enough in the well being of women like Rosa to try to address the root causes of the problems they face.