

Living in the Light

Isaiah 60:1-6 Ephesians 3:1-12 Matthew 2:1-12

Scott B. Martin

I've been reading a fascinating book, *God's Troublemakers: How Women of Faith Are Changing the world*, by Katharine Rhodes Henderson. In the opening chapter she begins with a series of very BASIC questions. Sooner or later I believe every person in the world faces these questions, probably repeatedly throughout their lives. Here they are:

“How do you create a life of meaning?” It doesn't get much more basic than that does it? None of us wants to live a meaningless life. All of us spend much of our lives either searching for meaning or living out the meaning we have found in life. As a pastor, as a former educator, as an adult human being, one of my greatest joys in life is engaging with others around the struggle for the search for meaning. There are those who would claim that there is no meaning in life, although they usually say this with more than a bit of wistfulness and longing for meaning. As Christians we believe that Christ in his life, death, and resurrection showed us the path to living a meaningful life. The direction he laid out for us moves us towards loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. This is not always an easy path, but our faith tells us this is the path to finding meaning in ones life.

The next question she asked is: **“What motivates people to try to change the world?”** This is a very important question. We all need motivation to do anything. We do not do anything we are NOT motivated to do.

Now most of us don't try going to change the world on a massive scale, although heaven knows it needs it: poverty here and abroad; war in

the Middle East, the Congo, Sri Lanka, and many other places; a ecological crisis of worldwide proportions; an economic crisis brought on by greed and what Alan Greenspan called “irrational exuberance”; hunger in major cities, small cities and rural areas around the world; millions of people here and abroad without adequate health care; AIDS, malaria, river blindness, cancer, Alzheimer’s, and a host of other illnesses we have not figured out how to cure completely; etc. Yes, not many of us are in a position to even try and change the world on a massive scale. Fortunately, as Christians, we believe that is not what God calls us to do. God simply wants us to do our part and to do our part we must not give up hope. We are called to believe that if we do our part the world can and will be changed for the better. To give up this hope is to give up trying. To give up this hope is to lose the source of strength, endurance and courage required to keep going when the going gets tough and results seem inconsequential.

Her next question is related to the first and as members of a church that is very interested in pursuing justice here and abroad we need to pay close attention to this question: **“When faced with injustice, why do some people walk away, while others stop, respond, and act?”** Let’s not kid ourselves. The overwhelming majority of people have at sometime in their lives, maybe even for most of their lives seen injustice and failed to do anything about it. They are too busy with their own lives. They feel powerless to do anything about it. They think it’s “nothing to do with them.” They don’t want to appear “odd” to their neighbors and friends, or to be embarrassed, or worse yet, even anger their friends and neighbors. Many have simply bought into the oppressors thinking and way of doing things. Many benefit from the

injustice in some way. Many simply don't want to rock the boat. Maybe they don't want to put their own family, their own lives and livelihood at risk. The answer as to why people do not try to correct injustices around them are many and varied. I have probably not exhausted the list!

The amazing thing is that some people do indeed see injustice and do something about it. Thank God for them! They may be national and world leaders who use their bully pulpits to speak out against injustice and use their power and influence to recruit others to do something about it. They may be a Martin Luther King, or a Gandhi, or a Dorothy Day, or a Marian Wright Edelman.

They may also be a simple unknown foot soldier in the cause for justice. They may simply be too tired to move to the back of the bus and refuse to move. They may lick envelopes in an office. They may send in a small financial contribution. They may simply speak up for the poor and the oppressed to a co-worker.

We come back to Henderson's question: **“When faced with injustice why do some people walk away, while others stop, respond, and act?”** If you have ever walked away from injustice without doing anything, why did you do it? If you have responded to injustice and tried to do something about it, why did you do it? These are important questions that only you can answer. These are questions that can help shape your life, the life of those around you and the life of the world.

This brings us to our next question: **“Does one individual life matter?”** We all know that a large group of people can make a difference, but can one person really make a difference?

The Bible is full of people who have both run away from injustice and done nothing and people who have responded to injustice and done

something. Moses leaves the comforts of the Egyptian palace to fight for his people who are slaves and oppressed. The parable of the Good Samaritan tells a story of people on both sides of this issue. Paul encourages one of his flock to free his slave Onesimus. Jesus over and over again helped the poor, the orphan, the leper, the outcast and the sinner about to be executed by society. All of these individuals and many more in the Bible definitely made a difference in the lives of the individuals they helped but in many cases in the world at large. They did so by acting as positive ripples in a the pond of the world. Their actions moved others to also do what they could do and they in turn moved others, and so forth and so on. As people of faith we are called to respond to injustice, alone if need be, but like many in the Bible we may well find that others join in as well.

Next Henderson asks: **“How can one person be a force for good?”**

This is a very important question. It is precisely at this point that many people get hung up. I believe most people are good people. I believe, that given a chance, most people will help their fellow human beings, if they can.

I can't tell you how many times when I am working on a funeral for someone and I'm visiting with the family to learn something about the deceased, that the family will say something like, he or she, “was a good person. They would do anything for someone else.” Having told me this the stories start to spill forth about what the person did to help others.

This works pretty well on a one on one situation and certainly the Bible calls us to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, give a cup of cold water to the thirsty, visit those who are sick on in prison. The tricky part comes when we are dealing with massive problems like: poverty, racism, global warming, etc. Then we might find ourselves despairing of an individual being able to

do anything to help. Don't give in to this despair. Yes, many problems are overwhelming in their size and complexity, but everybody can do something. God does not expect us to do everything, only what we can and sometimes a little bit more, with God's help!

The last question Henderson asks is a particularly crucial question for people of faith like ourselves: **“What, if anything, does God have to do with it?”** An atheist would say “Nothing!” An agnostic would say, “I don't know.” A person of faith might well say that God has everything to do with it!”

In the mid 1980's Gretchen Buchenholz, then 40 year old director of a daycare center, was looking for an address. Mistakenly, she went in the wrong door and ended up at 251 Church Street instead of 250 Church Street. What she saw shocked her. Children were knocking on a metal door begging for food and something to drink. There were about 75 families laying on the floor sleeping next to each other. She says of this, “It was really something that you would be sickened by in the fourth world, but here in New York City, we're talking about a very affluent time, something so foreign. I was really outraged, and at the same time moved to do something about it.”

She did two things right away. She made three phone calls One to disaster relief at the Red Cross, because she knew people there. Second, she called the deputy mayor of operations to request an immediate food delivery. Third she called the New York times to draw their attention to the problem, so they would do an article and hopefully get people interested and outraged enough to help. Finally she did something very practical. She went and bought some big bags of bread and peanut butter and brought them back.

Since that time she has gone on to found an organization, ABC, to tackle, children's issues in the city.

Gretchen grew up as a Catholic but is not a practicing Catholic today. When asked what role religion or God played in all of this, Gretchen quotes Archibald McLeish's play *JB*, in which someone says, **"The candles in all the cathedrals are out, all the lights are out, there's nothing but darkness. Blow on the coals of my heart."** Henderson says of Gretchen, "I sensed that Gretchen actually had a form of faith that wasn't held well by current denominational boundaries and dogma."

There are many today, both inside and outside the church like Gretchen. "What if anything does God have to do with it?" I believe God's Holy Spirit blows on the coals of our hearts. God is the Light of the World and calls us to live in the Light and share the light with others. Amen.

Alternate ending:

Very early this morning I was driving through the plaza area downtown. The sun had not yet come up and not only was it dark, but it was very foggy. I was struck by the lights: the street lights and the Christmas lights on the trees in the circle. They somehow seemed all the more cheerful and encouraging because of the foggy darkness around me. Each light, large and small was doing its best to push back the dark fog that surrounded it. Each light, large and small, was surrounded by a halo, produced by the light penetrating the dark fog around it. The words of the carol came to me, *"Silent Night, holy night, Child of God, love's pure light, Radiant beams from your holy face, bring the dawn of redeeming grace;"* That light still shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Let us live in the Light! Amen.