

The Specificity of Faith

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I have been wanting to talk about Mina Dillingham for years. Mina was what I called a middle class bad lady. She was about 85 years old when I first met her. but looked about 1000. She had wild, pure white hair that I am absolutely sure was never combed the entire time I knew her. She was almost blind, and squinted, and a bit deaf, and so she yelled. She wore big fuzzy, floovv bedroom slippers to church. she mumbled through prayers. she never took a bath, and she drove all of the nice, middle class, intelligent people in my congregation almost crazy. She never missed a potluck or a party. She always came to any Bible Study offered. She was very faithful in attending Women's Fellowship. She was also a bit insane. She was very attached to the more unusual scriptures in the Bible--you know, the ones that talked about Jesus coming again on a cloud, or about the vision of God that Isaiah had, or the wild stories in the book of Revelation. She would quote these at any opportunity, and she thought any time was the right time! She would take the extra bullitens after each Sunday's worship and walk over to the local grocery store and hand them out to whoever came by. She looked like a spook, of course, all bedragled and wild, ribbons taced on her chest, with her inevitable plastic bag of old camoaion buttons, bullitens, pencils that inacurately quoted scripture, and so on. Most folk would just look the other way when they saw her coming.

but she would walk all over the city in her beat up bedroom slippers and ancient polyester dresses. She was a character.

But the thing I like about Mina best was that she really cared about people. It was rather hard to take sometimes, but she vehemently cared. My favorite Mina story is this one. Our church choir had, once a year, a women's choir Sunday, when all sorts of women in the church would get together to learn a simple anthem. People who had no time or ability to be there every week would make a special effort to be there for Women's Choir--often about 40 women. And one year Mina decided to sing, too. Mind you, she was unable to see the music, let alone read it. She couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. But it was Womens' Choir Sunday, and she was a woman, and so she was going to sing. Everyone rather studiously avoided her, but as the group left their rehearsal, the choir director told them that they didn't have to wear a robe the next Sunday--they could just wear a dress. One woman spoke up, grinning, "I don't have a dress--can I sing anyhow?" It was a woman who always wore beautiful suits, so everyone laughed, and she was assured that a suit was an acceptable substitute.

The following Sunday, as I was walking through the church parlor, Mina came in early, even for her, with some clothes over her arm. "Girl" she said--that's what she called me--"Girl, where is that lady who doesn't own a dress?" I am sure that I made some confused remark and barely paused, but Mina spoke up again, "Girl, there is a lady in the choir who doesn't have a

dress, and I was afraid she couldn't sing without one, so I brought her one of mine." That stumped me. I walked back to her as she laid out a dress that was the epitome of what would work for Mina. It was lime green polyester with ruffles of yellow knit fabric poorly sewn on the arms. It was clean and fresh, but terribly wrinkled. Mina smoothed it out on the couch, and repeated her question. I was stumped. I was very touched by her gesture, but I wasn't at all sure whether the woman in question would recognize the poignancy and love of Mina's offering, and so I finally decided to reassure Mina that the woman had found an acceptable dress to wear. "Oh" said Mina, and she very carefully folded up her polyester dress and put it away in the ever-present plastic bag over her arm. She eventually found the choir, and even managed to come in, sit through the service quietly, and stand when they stood.

Mina died about a year after that, and I always thought it was a miracle that she hadn't been hit by a car or fallen off of an overpass! The funeral was at the church, even though it was not her children's church. I came in to look at Mina in an open casket, and started to laugh. Her family had, of course, had her beautifully dressed in a lovely new lavender dress with pearls. Her hair was done--all of that wild white hair was perfectly curled and waved. Her fingernails were clean. She looked like a matriarch. But someone who really loved and understood her had put one of her favorite ornaments on her--a bow like you would use on a birthday present. As far as I know, she was buried with

that bow. and with a handful of her prizes--bullitens. pencils, and campaign buttons.

The hymn that we sang at the funeral was a quiet commentary on her life. It's a familiar one--Jesus shall reign where'er the Sun. The last verse was for Mina. "Let every creature rise and bring peculiar honors to the king: angels descend with songs again, and earth repeat the loud amen."

Peculiar honors to the king.

When this hymn was written. of course, peculiar did not mean odd or weird. but meant specific or particular. It was a hymn about the time of the reign of the Christ, when the weary would find rest, when the prisoner would be released, when the poor would be given enough, when the hungry filled, the sick healed, the hurt comforted.

It is a hymn that relates very well to the scripture passage from Matthew this morning.

This is a passage that talks about Judgement Day. It talks about the time when all people would be examined, and separated, one from the other. And the passage goes on to tell us, in very clear detail, what it is that will be looked at when we are brought up for judgement. Listen to the list again: I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was

naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me. " This is a list, and certainly not a complete list, of things done by those that at the judgement day God would call righteous. This is a very specific, very particular set of things to do. These are things that serve those in need. And the scripture says that these are the things done by those who are considered righteous. But it is not just that those people did them. It is that they did them, and when it was told to them that they had in fact done these things to the king, their response was, "When did I see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and give you drink, or when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? when was it that I saw you sick, or in prison and visited you? " And the king himself will say, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

The righteous were unaware of their righteousness.

And the unrighteous? When they asked, in utter bewilderment, why they were condemned, they were told that it was not that they had done something evil, but that they had not done something good. They were condemned for their inaction.

The faithful life is to be one lived for others. This does not mean an anxious, unloving, tense striving for perfection, here, folks. We are not to let ourselves get wrapped up in trying so

hard to be the right kind of faithful servant Christian that we become totally self-absorbed in being good. That is the road to true belly button gazing and selfish seeking of affirmation. It is the righteous in this passage that really give us the key to the whole thing--it is their unawareness that they are something out of the ordinary, that they are anything special at all. These are people who do good, who love and serve their brothers and sisters because that is what one does. If someone is hurting, of course we would comfort them, right? If someone is hungry, we would as a matter of course feed them.

This is, of course, rather condemning to all of us. I believe. It is hard for many of us to be active in helping without getting some sort of credit for what good people we are. It is not always a matter of course that we visit the prisoner or care for the sick. The prisoner is pretty scary, and the sick make us uncomfortable. We find it difficult to love the ones that seem pretty unlovable to us. Our feelings get in the way of our willingness to serve.

But it is living a life of mercy and compassion, it is being there for the ones in need that is the life we are told is the faithful one. We come to church in order to hear of God's unfailing love for us, and then we are told to go out from this sanctuary to be quiet, faithful witnesses to that same love for all people. The witness is to be one of mercy, of tenderness for the aches of humanity. It is a challenge.

One more story. It is one I am not as happy about, but it fits here. I believe. Just a few months or so before I left Omaha, there started coming to the church a very unusual couple. I noticed them briefly the first week that they came, because the woman was wearing a big hat, which was pretty odd, and because in our very white congregation, a mixed race couple was a bit unusual. Not unheard of, but different enough to notice. They sat at the back, and left very early.

A couple of weeks later they came again, and stayed long enough to shake my hand as they left, and then I realized that the person in the hat, nylons, dress, and make-up was not a woman at all, but a man, and I was pretty uncomfortable. The two people continued to come, and they were quiet, pleasant, and gradually moved up so that they were sitting in the front of the church. Other people had of course noticed them by now, and mostly did pretty well, and accepted this somewhat awkward situation with a fair amount of grace. And then one Sunday they were not in church, and the next week I received a call from the prison. Crystal--and that was the only name I knew her/him by--was in jail, and she needed help getting her things out in storage.

I confess, this was not what I wanted to do. I hemmed and hawed and squirmed internally, but eventually agreed to go get a check at the prison and deliver it to the landlord of her home so that when the storage people came, they would be paid up front and the things out away.

And then I let it go. I did what she asked, but no more. I even had a good chat with the landlord, who told me that Crystal's real name was Joel, and that basically he was a decent tenant. But I was so uncomfortable with all of this that I did not do what would have been the right and caring thing to do. I did not go see Crystal. I did not check up on her in any way, or even get in contact with the prison chaplain. I just dropped it, relieved that I had done a little something and could be over with it.

A life of mercy is not always an easy one. We do not get to pick and choose the people to whom we will show mercy and lovingkindness. Most of the time, people just show up in our lives, almost as a gift from God. It is up to us to respond in love. When we feed the concrete and specific needs of our brothers and sisters, we are doing it to Christ. It is the life of mercy that gives peculiar honors to God. May we all be blessed with the gut level compassion to be faithful in all of the ways we know how. Amen