
How many of you know what a blog is? Often a little slow to get hep to the latest technological advancements, I am new to the whole concept. But as I was exploring preaching in relationship to the book the "Leading Causes of Life," I went online to see what others were saying about it. I found some neat stuff. There is a really lovely testimony from Gary Gunderson's daughter about "this cool book her dad has written." As well as the excerpt I'm about to share with you written by a "blogger" named *Larry Hollon*. Larry's apparently all over this form of communication and offers regular commentary on *journalism*, culture and religion on his "blog" which can be found on homepage.mac.com/larryhol/iblog. What I will read for you in moment is Larry's fifth posting from Mutare, Zimbabwe. His story is about a woman named Gertrude and the ways in which Prey and Gunderson's book helped him get a fresh perspective on her situation.

But before I relay his story, first a quick review. We have been talking about the "five leading causes of life" from the book- so far we have covered two; **Connection and Coherence**.

Who can tell me something about **Connection**; what is it? Why does it matter?

- To use Gunderson and Prey's language, "Connection brings about life. Connections are like the breath of air on which our very lives depend."(Page 63) We need connections to survive.

How about Coherence?

- Coherence is that thing that helps us feel as though life makes sense. What happens in the past, present, and future is somehow comprehensible, somewhat predictable as a whole.
- The loss of coherence is an unmistakable sign that something is amiss in the fundamental health of an individual, community or nation.
- Human life is caused and sustained by coherence.

Today we are talking about Agency. Gunderson and Prey define "Agency" as the ability to move, choose and act. "Agency is the human capacity to do."(Pg 109) As with the other two concepts, I find it most helpful to communicate their meaning by connecting them to life stories. This is Larry Hollon's story.

Gertrude grew up in an orphanage run by The United Methodist Church in Old Mutare. She knows how painful it is to be without the love of family, even when you live in a community that cares for you and gives you their love. It took some deep thinking, she says, about what to do when she reached the age of eighteen and was too old to remain in the children's home.

For a child with no family to fall back on it's hard to be thrust into the world to make your own way. Gertrude chose to become a pastor, and more, she chose to also take on responsibility for children who, like her, have no others to help them reach maturity.

She isn't operating an orphanage with paid staff, but she does have legal guardianship of the children in her care. Ten children live in her home in rural Zimbabwe and she has legal responsibility for the well being of seven others.

I learned this when she whispered to me in a workshop on writing. We were asked to share one thing about ourselves and she said barely audibly, "I have seventeen children." That got my attention! I learned she felt called to care for orphaned children as she had been cared for, and because she knows first-hand the emotional struggles they live with.

Amazed by this (arrangement), I continue to ask all the questions whose answers come so naturally to Gertrude. In fact, they make my questions seem trivial.

How did you decide to do this?

"I understand what the children go through so I just decided to help them."

How do you make ends meet?

"I teach them to garden. We have a subsistence garden. I teach them to make rolls. We sprinkle sugar on them and sell them."

Can you make enough from gardening and baking to survive?

"Some of my children are adults now. They work in the city and send me money." She makes it sound so simple.

I would have mulled it over until I convinced myself of the impossibility of such a scheme, or I would have written a plan, changed it a few dozen times, given it further thought and decided I needed additional advice, and I'd still be considering it. But Gertrude just went and did it.

No matter how many times I go to Africa, I find a similar story. I find people who just do what has to be done without considering why they can't do it. It's built into the fiber of the continent, I believe. And it's why despite all that should cause us to despair for Africa, I don't. Africa is a continent so full of life it's beyond imagination.

Gary Gunderson with Larry Pray-summarize Gertrude's spirit perfectly, here is how Gary and Larry write about people such as Gertrude:

As the swell of AIDS orphans reached tidal proportions, UNICEF and others wondered what kind of help and scale was possible. The obvious answer-orphanages-was impossible. How could we build and sustain orphanages for 20 million children amid already broken African economies? The teams launched a small study in six countries to evaluate what might be done by the world's humanitarian agencies.

To everyone's surprise, they learned that small groups of village women had already moved quietly, but at very large scale. On average, each group of women (usually members of a small church) was taking care of about a hundred kids, sort of like a perpetual, full-service summer camp. This was happening in thousands of villages without any encouragement, training, or funding from the big agencies from afar that were thought to be indispensable in such work.

The ironclad rule of community organizing is to never do for someone what they can do for themselves. This is because agency is a sacred, generative well of life to be tended with reverence.

These women expressed their own agency, not waiting or even thinking about waiting for any agencies. They simply did what they could do. While in most villages, the male preachers were still going on perpetuating the worst stigmas imaginable about these kids--the women simply did what they knew to do.

What happens when we hold this story up alongside this morning's Gospel text from Luke 13:6-9?

Jesus then told them this story: A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. One day he went out to pick some figs, but he didn't find any. So he said to the gardener, "For three years I have come looking for figs on this tree, and I haven't found any yet. Chop it down! Why should it take up space?"

The gardener answered, "Master, leave it for another year. I'll dig around it and put some manure on it to make it grow. Maybe it will have figs on it next year. If it doesn't, you can have it cut down."

Fig tree free association time: based on your life experience, what comes to mind when you hear the image of a fig tree?

- They are a symbol of blessing.
- A symbol of abundance.
- Fig trees bear fruit annually from early Spring to late Fall.

They actually play a pretty significant role in early Jewish culture, so you can bet that this story is embedded with meaning for the people to whom Jesus is speaking and again latter when it was being retold by the Gospel author. For instance, we know that in the Hebrew Scriptures the destruction of a fig tree stands as a curse on the land.

We also know that a fig tree takes three years to mature and according to Levitical rule, they are unclean for the first three years. Remember the master is discouraged that this tree has not yet produced fruit-but by all accounts it is a young tree and even if it had produced fruit in the first three years he wouldn't have been able to eat it. Hmmm?

Figs show up a lot in Jewish wisdom literature, which is what much of Jesus stories are based on, in those stories there are good figs and bad figs, but the moral of those stories seems to be that even bad figs give off a fragrant odor. With God, in other words, it is not as simple and good or bad, black or white. In fact what looks good on the surface may in the end not be so good, and the same is true of the reverse-what appears to be bad on the surface in God's eyes may be a whole different ballgame. Perhaps that is what Jesus is getting at-and that ties back into our African story doesn't it?

What on the surface appears not to be producing and in need of outside intervention- may in fact be bearing fruit that we ourselves are not able to see. It is kind of like what's been happening throughout winter. Did you know that roots grow faster under ground in the winter than leaves grow in the spring and summer, learned that from a plumber this past week? Imagine that, all we see on the surface is dead gray stuff meanwhile amazing life is going on just under our feet.

If there were world and time enough, it would be fun to imagine ourselves as each of the characters in this text; the Master, the Gardner and the tree. If you have some time this week while you are stuck in traffic or in the grocery store line, it might be an interesting thing to think on.

But let's assume for the sake of getting to the semi-annual meeting at some point today- that we are the trees, God is the Gardener, and the conventional world is the Master wanting to chop the tree down. What does the story say to us then?

To me it says that what's happening on the inside isn't always discernable on the outside. That God is there, giving us all we need to support our growth and transformation, God'll pack manure around our feet if that is what it takes to help us go deep- but the decision to grow, to do-the **agency** is up to us.

What I like most about this passage is that it does not tell us what happens in the end. It doesn't tell us if the tree produced and lived a good long life or if it didn't and got chopped down. God will not do for us what we are able to do for ourselves. The **agency** is up to us. We have all we need to bear good fruit.

I like to think that during Lent our roots in God, our right relationship with God is growing deeper just beneath the surface and come Easter we will experience the resurrection of Christ as a blossoming in our hearts.

Connection, Coherence and Agency, on Palm Sunday we will talk about the next piece of the five-part equation, **Blessing**, followed on Easter morning by the last of the five being **Hope**. **Connection, Coherence, Agency, Blessing and Hope**, The five leading causes of life.

May God continue to lead us in the paths of right relationship, relying on our own agency and rooted in God's abundant love-may we continue to be a people who bear good fruit.

Amen

