

Sarah Hall Goodwin: Feeding the Fifty Thousand in Uganda

Sermon by Sarah Hall Goodwin for July 27, 1997

Feeding the Fifty Thousand in Uganda

I had a dream a couple of weeks ago in which I was on a college campus feeling overwhelmed because I had three sermons or lectures to give during the next three weeks and as usual I was not prepared. And on top of that, as the dream continued, somebody stole my bicycle and left in its place an old one that had neither brakes nor gears!

So I woke up at 5 a.m. wondering what on earth I was going to say in my sermon to Seekers. I sat up and wrote a page and a half of ideas in very rough draft, noting with satisfaction in my journal "if I can do this 2 or 3 more times I should have enough ideas for a sermon."

And I did – at least once more. Then on Thursday I looked over what I had written and was disappointed to find very little of real substance: some thoughts resulting from my recent trip to Uganda (but not enough for a sermon) and some ideas connected to my long-standing dissatisfaction with certain tendencies in Seekers theology as I hear it expressed in sermons and worship.

I have become aware in recent year that early in life I developed an overly critical and analytical attitude about things around me – people, institutions, books, and maybe myself too. I have been trying to get out of or past this negative mode. I certainly didn't want to overdo what I don't

like about Seekers. Bear with me here: remember I'm a slow learner. I've been single all my life and have not had the benefit of correction from spouse or offspring.

In my disappointment with my sermon ideas up to that point, I reread the lectionary scriptures, and John's account of the feeding of the five thousand caught my attention. The message I get in that account is that God can take the small things we give to him and produce astounding results. So perhaps God can take these few small and maybe incoherent thoughts I have and multiply them into a sermon that spiritually feeds this sophisticated and skeptical congregation.

Let me start with Uganda. How many of you have been to Uganda?

It is a small, pearl-shaped country right on the Equator. (Winston Churchill called it the pearl of Africa.) It is bordered by Kenya on the east, Sudan on the north, the former Zaire on the west, and on the south Rwanda, Lake Victoria, and Tanzania.

Uganda passed through a nightmare of civil war and almost anarchy led by two murderous despots – Idi Amin and Milton Obote – from about the middle 1960s to 1986. Obote was overthrown in '86 by the present president Y.K. Museveni, and Ugandans since then have enjoyed freedom, democracy, and economic growth. Three weeks didn't make me an expert, but I sensed that the title of Freedom and Democracy in Uganda was not just political rhetoric.

I had a three-week visit there in June with an African family – the Elderhostel people would describe it as a homestay. PCVs would call it getting into the culture. The Ankrahs' home is on a hilltop up from the village of Mukono, about 20 miles out from Kampala on the road east to the Kenya border. They have a 360 degree view of the lush green countryside below with Kampala and Lake Victoria in the distance.

Down the hill are the theological college campus and the house

where Ankrahs lived for 17 years when Kodwo was director of the development program for the Church of Uganda. He retired about five years ago. Maxine Ankrah has spent the last four years in Northern Virginia working with the AIDS Control and Prevention project of Family Health International. Before moving to Uganda Kodwo had an outstanding career with the AACCC and the World Council of Churches, working with refugees all over Africa starting in the early 60s.

Kodwo is a graduate of Goshen College, a Mennonite school in Indiana, to which he came through unusual circumstances. As a schoolboy in Ghana he had dozens of pen pals all over the world and one was a girl in Indiana, to whom he happened to write about his ambition to study in the U.S. Her mother, a Mennonite, found two sponsors for this young African she had never seen who financed his trip to the U. S. and supported him through his four years at Goshen College. Then he went to Hartford Seminary and the University of Connecticut, where he met his wife Maxine and when I became a friend with both.

The Ankrahs have undertaken a remarkable project for their retirement years. They are building a conference center and science high school on the land just below their home. The conference center with housing for 50 people is almost finished – a for-profit enterprise in order to finance the high school which will be built later. They have done this entirely with their own resources. Kodwo will be here sometime before the end of this year and I hope you can hear some of his stories more directly.

A few days after I arrived in Uganda, returning from Kampala to Mukono I observed many truckloads of people heading out of Kampala. They were going up to Namungongo for the observance the following day of the anniversary of the Ugandan Martyrs – 22 young men who chose to be burned to death by the king of the Bagandas in 1886 rather than give up their recently-acquired Christian faith. Not too many years earlier, the king had asked Henry Stanley, the explorer, to send missionaries to

teach his people, and the Church Missionary Society and a Roman Catholic order in England had responded. But the king wasn't accustomed to have his subjects, especially pages in his court, obey a higher authority than he. So when they would not recant he had them wrapped in straw mats and burned to death.

On June 3, the day of the anniversary, John the driver and Tuva the houseboy and I joined the procession up to the shrine. (There are two shrines: Catholic and Anglican.) We stopped at the Catholic one because it was nearer, and there was a huge mass of people – maybe 40-50,000 people from all over the country and neighboring countries. They were serious pilgrims. It wasn't just an outing. Many had camped out overnight. I had one of about three white faces in the entire gathering, and certainly was the only female wearing pants!

As well as the Martyrs, there are other evidences of the missionary efforts which began in the last century:

- Churches packed for Sunday morning worship. The first Sunday I went to the All Souls Cathedral of the Church of Uganda for the 11 a.m. service – the most un-Anglican, non-liturgical service I have ever attended at an Episcopal Church. The congregation was all African, and the service was in English of course, since that is Uganda's official language. There was a well thought-out and delivered sermon from a young layman. The other two Sundays, Kodwo and I went down the hill to the theological college.
- Theological college and related institutions down the hill from the Ankrah's house – elementary and secondary schools, orphanage, vocational school.
- 85 percent of Ugandans are Christian, including the president.

The Christian church is growing faster in Africa than any other continent.

Uganda was one of the first countries in Africa where AIDS was identified. Maxine Ankrah, teaching social work at Makerere University in Kampala, was one of the first people in Africa, if not the world, to study the social and cultural aspects of the spread of AIDS. Did the first study in Uganda. Uganda is the only country in Africa that shows a decline in new cases of AIDS. Government has been more open is not "in denial" about the situation. Also it conducts a vigorous education and prevention campaign. Billboard on the way to the airport: "Be abstinent, be faithful, or use a condom. Don't get AIDS."

Having a really African experience gave me a lot of opportunities to develop patience – something I badly need.

- The Saturday lunch when we waited over two hours for the guests of honor to arrive.
- The day trip to birdwatch on Lake Victoria when the boats were three hours late at the point where they were supposed to meet us in order to cross the Nile River in Murchison Falls National Park, both going and coming.

These kinds of experiences, reinforced by the reading I was doing in the Rule of St. Benedict, led me to this (for me) great insight which I recorded in my journal: "It is not a great tragedy if I am bored out of my mind – briefly – or if the food isn't good." Being in Africa encourages humility.

Second theme in this sermon: What shall I do about Seekers? I am one of those people on the fringe. I disagree with a lot of the theology in some of the sermons I hear. Some of the music doesn't appeal to me. Some of the excesses of "inclusive language" turn me off.

So what keeps me coming? The many positive things I find here. The sense of community, close friends, human warmth and encouragement, the vitality and liveliness, openness, people who take their Christian commitment very seriously. Seekers

are good at evoking people's gifts, whether you want them to be evoked or not. Seekers gave me a lot of personal support during my work with Literacy Volunteers. To what other church would I be able to ride a bicycle for Sunday morning worship?

It's too bad that along with the wonderful aspects of Seekers community we can't have a little more of the historic Christian faith, the riches of traditional liturgy, music, mysticism. Sometimes I am on the brink – about to jump in despite misgivings and reservations or ready to jump out.

In Uganda another reminder of missionaries of the last century is the traditional dress of the women in a large part of the country. It is long and voluminous with a wide sash and butterfly sleeves. It is very impractical, especially considering the work women do and the distances they walk. Yet women hold on to them fiercely as part of their heritage, even though they really aren't.

Good example of the need to examine cherished traditions and to discard the non-essential. But the basic Christian message of the missionaries doesn't have to be discarded along with outmoded attire or practices. Perhaps herein is a message for Seekers. Are Seekers too much attracted to anything and everything new and trendy in theology, Biblical studies, and spirituality, abandoning too easily Christian traditions because the old language, music, liturgy bring for some people memories of oppressive parents, authority figures, churches, systems of theology?

I have to confess that over the 12 years that I have attended Seekers worship there is an NT passage that occasionally pops into my mind, evoked by some part of the service, usually the sermon. From the second epistle to Timothy in the context of an admonition to be persistent in proclaiming the Christian message:

"I convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience.

... For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths."

You know, things like the theories of the Jesus Seminar.

When Fred Taylor was a pastor here, he used to tell us the lectionary Scriptures were related, the New Testament readings picked up themes from the Old Testament ones. I had difficulty finding those relationships in the readings for this Sunday. I did manage to find some connections. Psalm 14 is a good commentary on the story of King David's adulterous and murderous conduct. "There is no one who does good. ... They have all gone astray." Reminds us of the pervasiveness and persistence of evil. We all need redemption.

The gospel readings remind us that when human efforts fail, God does not abandon us. His presence is with us and his gifts are abundant.

And that leads us to the fourth reading from the letter to the Ephesians with the amazing prayer that the readers might comprehend the incomprehensible and know the unknowable. I am going to read it for closing.

"For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father. ... that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend. ... what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

"Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. " (Ephesians 3:14ff, New Revised Standard Version)