

A Question of Character

Peter JB Carman, August 15, 2010, Binkley Baptist Church

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

In the fall of 2006, I was sitting at my desk one day when the phone rang—on the other end was my friend Mark Caruana, pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church in Utica, New York. His church was a haven for refugees from Burma, many of them Baptists, members of the Karen tribal group. “Two Karen refugees have arrived in Rochester,” he told me. “I have heard about it from relatives in our church. I understand they have no food. And they don’t know anyone. Can you look into it?” I knew enough about Burma, having visited there, to know about the plight of the Karen people. And I was blessed to have two church members from another Burmese minority group, two Kachin women, to whom I could turn for help.

A day or so later we found ourselves in an apartment just a mile from the church, with not two but nine newly arrived refugees from Burma, ranging in age from four to about seventy. The tension in the air was thick. There was much fear as there was hope. This was their first real contact with neighbors. We were talking cautiously in a combination of rusty Burmese—a language they tended to avoid—translated for me into English. But a four-year old broke the tension as he started to climb all over me, exploring my hands—and beard. Then the warmth of our church volunteers, Hka Din and Pri Lawn, dispelled the last of it. Soon we were exploring the meager supply of elbow macaroni in the larder, with our new friends’ permission. We told them we were from a church and they said they wanted to visit.

So began an adventure that turned that church upside down. Today over half the attending people at the Lake Avenue Church in Rochester are refugees, mostly from Burma, with a few from the Congo and one from Sudan. They come there from backgrounds of incredible suffering and extraordinary faithfulness. Most were forced from their homes, sometimes running as fast as they could to avoid being seized for slave labor—or worse. Their villages had been burned. Some had seen loved ones killed. Many had then spent years in refugee camps in Thailand. The youngest had been born in camps and spent their entire young lives within the confines of the fences. One young woman—eighteen years old—shared with me that before her trip to the airport to come to the US she had never been on a bus, let alone an airplane. At Peace Camp this past July I had a chance to visit with about forty of them, who came to sing for us. Eh K’lu Taw, one of the nine, was there. We held each other tight—no letting go.

Today we are blessed here at Binkley to be visited by representatives of the Karen Baptist community here in Chapel Hill, Carrboro and Durham. Last week I visited their congregation in worship—they meet Sunday afternoons at Mt. Mariah Baptist Church on Erwin Road. I do not know their stories in detail—but I know that they belong to a people that has now been scattered all over the face of the earth. And I know that their ancestors came to Christianity in part as a result of the work of American Baptist missionaries. Theirs is a sister congregation to Binkley, and American Baptist congregation, just getting organized. It is made up of people for whom faith has been the sustaining strength in the midst of impossible circumstances. Some have been here for the better part of the last decade, some have arrived more recently. They have had to begin life anew, to make for themselves new homes, with the most limited of resources. They are our sisters and brothers; we share a faith tradition. And it is my hope that in the weeks and months ahead we will also develop a close supportive relationship as congregations.

The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us of our ancient forebears who faced impossible circumstances too. It is probably hard for those of us who have lived our lives in relative comfort to relate to the kind of faith one needs to have to face persecution, or torture, or exile. And yet each of us some day or another faces a moment when we must persist in the face of impossibility. Each of us has known, or will know, a moment when we must choose between what is right and what is to our advantage. Each of us must taste a time

when we have to choose between the requirements of self-interest and the call of Love. And in such a moment—the character defining moment—we find out that it is not enough to rely upon ourselves, not enough to pull ourselves up by our own proverbial bootstraps. We need a community then—and we need the gift of faith. For some in this church, the memory of the American Civil Rights movement remains strong. A professor friend from my seminary days, Leon Watts, lived through that time, marched and marched, prayed and spoke out and went to jail. Professor Watts used to say that he was no longer a believer in the immortality of the soul—because he had seen so many of those who suffered in that freedom movement were injured so profoundly in their spirits, that he no longer could hold to the conviction that the soul was somehow any less vulnerable than the body.

Whatever you think of bodies and souls, we know from experience that the human character—our personality, our mindset, our capacity for compassion—is shaped by our life circumstances. Those who start life unloved face a great challenge learning to express love to others, let alone themselves. Those who have been told from childhood that they are worthless find it easy to believe—down deep in the soul—that that is the case. And those who face great crises late in life are not invincible either. And this is where faith comes in. Because we have come through faith to know that there is more to the story of suffering, spiritual weakness and loss than what goes on in our own bodies, minds and hearts. There is a Spirit capable of raising the dead. There is a Power capable of transforming us in our weakest moments. There are faith communities capable of strengthening us as individuals to face whatever must be faced. And there is a great cloud of witnesses that has gone before us and surrounds us—both in practice and in prayer—that can raise us up again and again to face the challenges before us.

It is a question of character. How are our characters shaped? How are they sustained? And how, when we are broken in spirit, how are we raised up again? It seems to me that there are multiple shaping forces that make us who we are. Heredity for one, and the influence of our families—for better and for worse. Then there are the friends we happen to trust. And the circumstances life deals us—some of us with comfort and privilege, freedom and opportunity, others with very little of these. And yes, there is that inner voice that each of us has—call it the Soul—the free individual Being that is essentially you—and me. Yet there are two more factors that we cannot undercount.

The first of these is the collective faith experience that we who are here often call Church. I don't mean only the Sunday morning experience. I am talking about the person next to you in the pew or across the room who serves as an example of integrity or extraordinary love. I am talking about the conversation you had last week with someone when you had the uncanny sense that the two of you were not alone. I am talking about the stories we carry in our bones—of ancestors who fought for human rights, or other people we never met who, possessed by a greater vision, stood up against tyranny and gave their lives for a cause they would never see come to fruition. I am talking about the Sunday School teacher who affirmed you, or the saint of Christian faith or another faith whose example continues to say to you “Keep on keeping on.” Recently I was talking to a Quaker friend who has met an Iraqi imam, a Muslim man who has lost almost everything. But he reminded her of the power of Love....

The second shaping factor in making us who we are I simply want to call the God-factor. For me the most powerful experiential confirmation of this reality was a moment in a Connecticut prison, back around Thanksgiving of 1983. I was there for a few weeks, because of an act of civil disobedience, along with three other friends.

I remember one day looking through bars on through a thick window to the bars on the other side to the fence with razor wire beyond to a man sitting on the tailgate of a station wagon with shiny reflector sunglasses in the bright sunlight, a shotgun in his hands. And all of a sudden the bars started to melt away. I knew deep in my soul that I was free, that the bars were so much water and rust. It was a freedom that did not come from me, and it could not be taken by anyone else. It came from God. I smiled within.

Who we are, how we live, what risks we take for the sake of humankind, what sacrifices we make for the sake of a greater vision—in the end it comes down to this. We can be broken, but God cannot be. We can give up, but God can restore hope. We can betray each other, but we can also forgive and be forgiven. We can run out of love, but God can love any way, if need be through our empty shells. Around us are so many who have tasted this same grace. And when we cannot remember, cannot feel, cannot know ourselves, we yet look to them.

In 2003, the Baptist Peace Fellowship asked me to write a hymn for their summer gathering. Following the death of my mother just before that gathering, I penned these words....let me close with them.

With such a cloud of witnesses

With such a cloud of witnesses,
How can we turn from trust aside?
So let us run this race with joy,
And come what may, in love abide.

Strong light You cast across the years,
In human souls we still recall--
These gave their lives to testify
The rising grace that frees us all.

Some had no place to call their home
Some died in chains, some faced the sword!
Yet to the end, they walked in faith,
Held by your promise, living Word.

For all whose steps we slowly trace,
We give You thanks, still dawning Sun!
Till comes the day when love rules earth,
In Jesus' name, we'll carry on.

With such a cloud of witnesses,
We dare not throw their hope aside!
We'll stay Your course till night is done,
And come what may, in love abide.

Peter JB Carman
2003

L.M.

*A Meditation on Hebrews 11 and 12
for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America,
offered to God
in thanksgiving for Ineke Wichers Carman,
April 1933 to June 2003.
She survived a war and insisted on love.*