

Meditations by Janet Collingsworth

SMILES, HUGS AND TAX COLLECTORS...

The children at Casa Hogar Douglas orphanage in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico have an amazing sense of peace. In spite of their dire straights, the children and their caregivers, Lupita and Father Ramondo, always have a warm smile, an affectionate hug and a gentle word. I am always surprised by their serenity because it seems it would be hard to be at peace when the need is so overwhelming and the poverty so debilitating. Where does that peace come from? Is it because the smallest aid or contribution provides comfort and hope? Perhaps. Or perhaps this peace comes from the unwavering conviction that each and everyone of them are precious to God and that he will faithfully provide for them "even as he clothes the lilies of the field". Perhaps they are not bothered and distracted by an all consuming search for "more stuff" or "a better job" or "earthly wealth".

A bit less than 2000 years ago, Jesus spoke to a crowd on a hillside. In that sermon is a clue to the source of the peace and contentment of people at Casa Hogar Douglas. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...* That the poor would be blessed was a foreign concept then, just as it is today. But what is poverty *of the spirit*? Jesus explains in his parable of the *Pharisee and the Tax Collector...*

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.'" Luke 18:9-14

It was the shunned and outcast tax collector who was exalted before God. Feeling so unworthy of God's attention that he could not even look up to heaven, in selfless humility the tax collector emptied his soul. And God filled it with mercy and peace.

In the faces of the orphans of Nuevo Laredo I see spiritual wealth which far outshines the worldly riches I brought to share. Their peace comes from the assurance they have given all that is ours to give – our love. And in return we receive a precious gift...the kingdom of heaven...complete with a warm smile, an affectionate hug and a gentle word....

ARE YOU THE ONE?

Her deep brown eyes met mine, staring deep into my soul as if to ask “Are you the one? Are you the one that will finally help us? We been through so much and are so tired. Are you the one?”

The first time I met Hilde I was impressed by two things. First, her slumped shoulders and furrowed brow made it seem as if she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders. She was despair incarnate. And next, the way she tended to those around her. Hilde, the product of generations of New Orleanians, had just lost all her earthly possessions like thousands of others in the dispassionate wake of Katrina. Her husband was not well and required oxygen, a critical problem because their social security cards were lost in the storm. Her twin teenage boys looked shell shocked – and for good reason. In the six months before the hurricane they had already lost their home once to fire, and now again to the storm. Their strength and endurance had already been tested to the breaking point and their resolve, and yes, even faith, was wavering. Was God against them? They could not do more on their own. They needed help. As I approached, unsure of what to do or how to help, the look on all their faces was so clear - “Are you the one?”

“When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.’” Matthew 11:2-5

The reply Jesus gave to the disciples of John confirms the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 35 that God will come and strengthen and save them. As messengers of God’s word, we are all called to be “the one” to carry the yoke for those with a heavy burden. We are all called to be “angels” (“angelians” – Greek for messenger) and bolster resolve not only through worldly sustenance, but also with spiritual food. We are all called to...

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
‘Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.’ Isaiah 35: 3-4*

A QUIETER SPOT

Then Jesus said, "Let's get away from the crowds for a while and rest." There were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn't even have time to eat. They left by boat for a quieter spot. Mark 6: 31-32

Rising before the sun, I dry a load of laundry, walk the dog, make the lunches, drag the kids out of bed, get them and myself dressed, fed and in the car. While in car pool line I sign progress reports, double check for homework and remind each of the little darlings of the various after school activities. Finally making it to the office, I embark on a full day of meetings, reports, correspondence, checking off only about half of the things on my monster to do list. Then it's off to the church to help with a community food drive, to the store to get something for dinner and then back through the car pool line and the gauntlet of soccer, t-ball and dance. Dinner is fast food...again....before homework, baths and bedtime prayers.

When it is finally quiet I make my way toward bed, picking up jackets and toys scattered in the tornado's path. I am drained....and empty. How did my life get so out of control?

It is at exactly that moment that I need to sit, close my eyes, take deep slow breathes, and take myself to "a quieter spot." Even the lives of Jesus and his disciples reached such a frenzied pace that they had to "get away," so I know I am not alone. People came from all over to seek the spiritual and physical healing of Jesus. Even he knew that in order to help and provide for others, he first had to take care of himself and his disciples.

I can't leave "by boat" for my quieter spot, but I can take five minutes, dim the lights, and follow the advice of the Lord to "get away from the crowds for awhile and rest." Just for tonight, I'll close the to-do list, turn off the laundry room light . . . rest and be filled with the peaceful spirit of the Lord.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

FLOODWATERS

Save me, O God, for the floodwaters are up to my neck. Deeper and deeper I sink into the mire; I can't find a foothold to stand on. I am in deep water, and the floods overwhelm me. I am exhausted from crying for help; my throat is parched and dry. My eyes are swollen with weeping, waiting for my God to help me...But I keep right on praying to you, LORD, hoping this is the time you will show me favor. In your unfailing love, O God, answer my prayer with your sure salvation. Psalm 69: 1-3, 13.

To see her smile and hear the lilt in her voice you would never imagine that just a few days before Genevieve and her husband had been wading in neck-deep water trying to save six grandchildren entrusted into their care. The fate of their own daughters—the mothers of this lively brood—unknown, they moved them to higher ground and waited for help. They waited and prayed and waited some more. When help finally came, Gene praised God. While the kids may have thought being plucked off a roof by helicopter was great fun, Gene saw it as an answered prayer—one of many she would experience in the days to come.

After the helicopter came the crowds, the lines, the buses, the Astrodome, more lines, fear, hunger, thirst, filth, frustration, and more waiting. Days after the levy broke, Gene still had not heard from her daughters. Not knowing what else to do, she turned once again to God. “Dear Lord, please let them be alright.” A great sense of peace came over her. Looking up from her prayer, Gene gazed across the stadium and saw a figure approaching. As the woman came closer, Gene’s heart started to pound. Exhaustion and despair fled as Gene rose to her feet and raced across the crowded room, tentatively at first then at full speed, giggles mixed with sobs as she closed the gap. It was her daughter!

Sitting in a church pew in Plano, as far north as they could go on the gas and money they had, Gene tells me of the fear of being lost and the joy of being found. Over and over she thanks God for their salvation. Patting her daughter’s hand as though she might not ever be able to again, Gene’s face glowed with the Holy Spirit. “It was a miracle. God was surely lookin’ out for us.”

By Faith

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1

Two young boys worked quietly alongside their father, pulling down the walls of their home. Their mother, Maria, watched from the shade of a brightly colored blanket suspended on the narrow, wooden slats of a discarded shipping pallet. The dust and dirt whirl around them in miniature tornados, and heat rises in waves off the cracked earth, but they continue. Time is short.

Maria depends on nightly dialysis. When she received the machine that purifies her blood, the doctor told her she had to use it in a clean place. That was impossible. Their home in the *colonias* of Nuevo Laredo had dirt floors. The family prayed.

Two years later her pastor brought word that people she'd never met were coming to build them a home with floors. The family was overjoyed. The pastor held up a finger. “There's a condition.” He paused. “This house must be torn down before the new one can be built.”

The father paled. “We must tear down the home our sons grew up in? Who are these people? They are strangers to us. Can we trust them?” The pastor offered assurances, but it wasn't his home that would be torn down. The family prayed.

Two days before the “strangers” were to come to build the new house, Maria's husband and sons tore down the old one. The neighbors gather to watch. “Maria, you should wait,” they warned. What if these strangers don't come?” Sitting quietly in the shade of the blanket, Maria smiled. “God will provide.”

Do I have the faith of that family? Would I tear down my family's only shelter on the promise of strangers?

Yet that is what God calls us to do. Tear down the walls we build around our hearts on the promise that we will live with Him in His house for eternity.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” John 14:1-3