

Weekly Devotional

For the week of March 7, 2010



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We are a listening church

Being inspired by Christ as we hear the Bible speak in its historical context

Bible Background

In 1874, a child named Mary Ellen became the symbol for what is widely regarded as the beginning of public concern for the plight of abused and neglected children. Mary Ellen's father was dead and her mother could not care for her because she had to work full-time, so Mary Ellen's mother had no choice but to give up the child to New York state authorities. They placed her in the home of a woman living a tenement who locked her in a room, rarely allowed her outside, and did not provide adequate food or clothing.

Etta Angell Wheeler, a caring Methodist mission worker who visited the impoverished residents of the tenements regularly, was asked to check on the child by residents who were annoyed by the child's screaming.

So, under the pretext of asking for help for one of other tenement residents who was chronically ill, Etta introduced herself to the family of the child, where she discovered evidence of horrible physical abuse. In her own words:

"But the saddest part of her story was written on her face in its look of suppression and misery, the face of a child unloved, of a child that had seen only the fearsome side of life. These things I saw while seeming not to see, and I left without speaking to, or of, the child. I never saw her again until the day of her rescue, three months later, but I went away determined, with the help of a kind Providence, to rescue her from her miserable life."

Soon afterward, on Easter Sunday, Etta talked with the one neighbor who cared about the situation, a dying woman who wanted to live long enough to see the child freed from her captivity. As Etta wrote, the neighbor was *"...longing for the land where sickness is not. Yet always she had wished to stay until her little fellow sufferer was rescued. We spoke of Christ and the Resurrection, of the glorious meaning of Easter Day, and we talked of the child alone in the darkness, and prayed for her release."*

Since the few laws that existed to protect children from abuse were virtually never enforced, Etta could find no authority figures who would intervene on behalf of the child. Instead, Etta appealed to Henry Berg, the founder and

president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. (There was no society for the prevention of cruelty to children at the time.)

Together, a Methodist mission worker and an animal-rights advocate successfully persuaded a judge to rescue the child. Their efforts stirred so much public attention that the first child abuse prevention society was formally incorporated the next year, in 1875.

Mary Ellen went on to live a long and productive life. Her children and grandchildren described her as "gentle and not much of a disciplinarian". Although Mary Ellen rarely spoke about her abusive childhood experiences, she named her first daughter Etta, after the mission worker who rescued her.

Today, we celebrate the work of all those who work on behalf of children in difficult situations, like CASAs (Court Appointed Special Advocates), who see that that the interests of children are well-represented and cared for in the midst of legal proceedings. They remind us of the importance of listening to the neglected voices in our communities that cannot speak for themselves.

Question for reflection

How does our scripture from Isaiah and its description of the servant of God connect to those who work on behalf of children in difficult circumstances?

We are a learning church

Learning to love and serve with all people by drawing upon the resources of our culture, the arts, and the stories of our own lives

For further reading

You can learn more about Mary Ellen and Etta Wheeler at the following links:

<http://www.americanhumane.org/about-us/who-we-are/history/mary-ellen.html>

<http://www.americanhumane.org/about-us/who-we-are/history/etta-wheeler-account.html>

You can learn more about CASA at <http://www.casaforchildren.org>.

Scriptures
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First reading: Isaiah 42:1-4

From: The Message

Take a good look at my servant.

I'm backing him to the hilt.

He's the one I chose,

and I couldn't be more pleased with him.

I've bathed him with my Spirit, my life.

He'll set everything right among the nations.

He won't call attention to what he does

with loud speeches or gaudy parades.

He won't brush aside the bruised and the hurt

and he won't disregard the small and insignificant,

but he'll steadily and firmly set things right.

He won't tire out and quit. He won't be stopped

until he's finished his work—to set things right on earth.

Gospel: Luke 18:15-16

From: The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

People were bringing even infants to Jesus that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it.

But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."