

The Daughters of My People: Human Rights at Home
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The old song says,

Trouble in mind, I'm blue,
My poor heart is beatin' slow,
Never had so much trouble in my life befo'

I'm gonna lay my head
on that lonesome railroad track,
but when I hear the whistle,
Lord, I'm gonna pull it back

Im going down to the river
Take along my rockin' chair
and if the blues don't leave me,
I'll rock on away from thar

Well, trouble, oh, trouble,
trouble on my worried mind
When you see me laughin'
I'm laughin' just to keep from crying...

I think this song could easily have been written not just by po' black folks singing the blues in a racist South, but human rights workers as well. Oh, Trouble! Trouble in mind! My heart is breaking while my hands clap in time....gonna write another letter, gonna share my final dime, 'cos if I don't see some changes, they'll be trouble down the line...

Human Rights work is, as the saying goes, a 'tough row to hoe', and that's especially true for those of us who are from the good ole US of A. We have a lot of explaining to do when we sit in multi-cultural meetings, work on global issues, or even stand up for the Bible and those who believe it has worth. We are the convenient 'cause celebre' for any government wishing to trash another;

our issues are paraded out as part of any challenge to state sovereignty....but it was such a BAD state! we hear the government say after it has taken illegal action. Yet, our causes are the very first to go by the wayside after the war is won, the reconstruction begun, the trade deal sealed. Then we are told to stop making such a fuss, start learning pragmatism, because its going to be business as usual, and that was, indeed, the whole point. No wonder Jesus blesses the peacemakers: no one else is going to!

Oh, friends, trouble in mind!

A Muslim friend told me at the outset of taking up this burden for the sake of my own people's sin, that the business of HR is a tightly scripted, contentious and inbred little world. Every one has their part to play, and deviation from expectations of that role are neither welcomed nor tolerated. What's my part? I asked. Theological hit-woman? Token goy, perhaps? I've played that before. 'No', she said, 'you are the naive passionate Westerner. You get to ask the questions no one else is willing to, and you do it under the cover of well-meaning ignorance. You are still passionate; stay awhile in this work and all that's left is a sense of numbness and a need for prayer.'

It's true: when you learn that the two Afghani women on the national council for the reconstruction of Afghanistan refused to sit at the same table, much less be photographed together!—one a monarchist, the other a Marxist, its easy to keep voicing the Rodney King existential question: 'Can't we all just get along?' Can't the aid workers who have the money and the goods make common cause with the faith-workers who have the hearts of the people and can get the goods where they need to go? No, apparently, not: getting along and merging one's pool of resources around a common need is not on the table: aid workers are distrusted for their secular money and disrespect of traditional religions; faith workers are viewed by the other side as part of the problem and not part of the solution—and sadly, both sides are correct.. It is only possible to

shake one's head and sing the blues—trouble, trouble in mind! I am getting to have a lot more sympathy for Moses and his whining, complaining, not-very-efficient mixed multitude of escapees. I'm quite sure now that they all *didn't* get along, and a quick trip through the book of Numbers will back me up. Oh, trouble! Trouble in mind!

Now imagine the scenario: trying to speak for global compassion while your own government is using your own beloved Bible to implement everything *but* compassion. I have trouble, friends, great trouble with all that I hear coming out of the mouths of our unelected officials, especially with respect to religion. We hear we are a great, great country and that this is the effect of God's blessing and not human greed. We learn that, indeed, God has put our unelected leader at the head of the richest, most sophisticated military power in history 'for such a time as this', as the Book of Esther has it: it can only be God who has done this, says the born-again Christian general, clad in his military uniform, as he addresses a Christian church with apocalyptic fervor. It must be God, because it sure wasn't the people. Trouble! Trouble in mind!

When I hear the drivel and the prevarication that comes out of the mouths of our officials, our whining and ineffective political opposition (such as it is), when I hear the name of the Lord taken in vain again and again and used, like an American flag, to sell mindless nationalism as a Christian virtue—I turn up with a burning theological question:

will no one speak for the honor of God?

Oddly, the folks who take their Bible literally and with a blind eye are ALWAYS willing to tell you about God's honor: just go check out www.godhatesfags.com, or listen to their televangelists explain why God punished us with Sept. 11: not for any reason this group today might think, but because of those wicked liberals, feminists, fags and others! Yes, God will indiscriminately punish everyone within smiting range for transgressions against the sexual codes or codes of racial orthodoxy, but oh,

LORD! DON'T go mentioning that the very Gospels that don't say diddley-squat about sexual orientation have a whole LOT to say about rich and poor, wealth and poverty. They don't go mentioning that, now do they? Will no one speak for the Gospel, or is everyone busy saying, 'Lord, Lord!?' You know how *that's* gonna turn out in Matthew 25:

Then he will say to those at his left hand, Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Mt 25:41-46)

What I find most especially disturbing as a theologian is that while the culturally captive side that reads the Bible 'for the worst', for exclusion and salvation of that special few, are willing to talk about it at length, those who ought to be standing toe-to-toe, Bible in hand and making the case for Matthew 25 as the superior reading of American religiosity, *those* folks are sitting silent and embarrassed, clamming up as though there is no defense! Truly, the mainstream faith is troubled in mind: too namby-pamby to take on the tough texts, they—WE—let the Bible fall into hands that only know how to hit and not to heal! We wouldn't dream of disturbing our congregations with talk from the pulpit about *real* religious obligation to be true in the time of trial—for that is surely what we are in right now. No, not for us the fiery sermon, the relevant event, the horrifying prospect: we're busy promoting 'wholeness' and a psychobabble kind of salvation that values personal

comfort more than social change. No wonder the preachers of the new crusades against ‘evil doers’ find the mainstream church to be no ‘credible threat’!

Well, I am going to *be* a threat by doing what I do on non-threatening days: I read my Bible. I refuse to cede this living text with all its fractures, failings and futilities into the hands of oppressors. No. People have died for this text, people have lived for this text, and as long as my government wants to quote it as a warrant for its imperial wars, I am going to refuse to let their reading be the only one out there..

How this government can claim to be ‘Christian’ and do what it does—a recital of the Geneva Convention is not needed here, since I am preaching to the converted----how the good ole’ US of A can do what it does, rape and pillage the environment to the harm of all, refuse to forgo torture even of its own citizens, should they be unlucky enough to be brown and/or Muslim, how its can keep its little Guantanamo outpost and still look so smug and smirk on the evening news—the mind boggles, the heart breaks. It’s easy to sound like Isaiah (I am changing this passage a bit, because I am talking right here to the Church and *not* the Synagogue, so you need to hear it in our own language::

Easter and Christmas and the calling of assemblies — I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your prayer breakfasts and your Lord’s Suppers my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isa 1:13-17)

We always think of Human Rights as something ‘out there’, over yonder, a topic for those people who do not have *our* freedoms, our material blessings, the Bill of Rights. Well, for those raised in poverty, for the children of the poor in our own country, Human Rights are an issue right down on the ground, happening here and now. What have we done, with our easy acceptance of blessings as our *right* to be safeguarded and coerced from the rest of the world? A HR activist from another country, sent on a mission by our State Dept. determined to show that dissidents in the United States are not muzzled or censored—(ha!), asked me: what does it feel like to belong to the most powerful and wealthy country history has ever known? Not good, I said, not good at all: although I benefit indirectly from this country’s hegemony as much as any educated and employed person, I know only too well how hollow that wealth, freedom and power really is. When wealth is used only to secure more wealth, instead of more well-being, there can be no true enjoyment, no real security, no enduring calm.

Let us consider the conditions of the daughters of the poor. You heard Leviticus: worth remembering that there are many worthwhile things in that book we love to hate for its exclusionary world view and navel-gazing fascination with purity. ‘You shall not make your daughter into a prostitute’. So—what about it?

Now a strange thing happened to me on the internet. My ISP sold itself for about the 3rd time and my browser got upgraded and I made a big mistake. The lives of professors are not exactly overripe with free time, so I often shop on line. When I naively typed in ‘lingerie’ into my search engine, hoping to upgrade my family’s underwear drawer, a terrible thing happened: an ‘adult’ toolbar, a nastier Trojan Horse virus as I’ve ever wrestled, came in and attached itself to my Windows registry. Each day I was treated to more and more pornography—visuals that have nothing to do with Free Speech or the First Amendment, or even the rather wholesome approach to

the whole subject that exists in Amsterdam, one of my favorite multi-cultural cities. My email flowed with the sexual juices of American prurience: one morning I learned that ‘Anorexic Chix suck...’ .well, you can finish the rhyme. The photos on the front page of that site showed me girls who looked as though they had just walked out of a death camp, performing sexual acts of a graphic nature that shall not be described here in chapel! Another site, ‘Slapthatass.com’ asked me poignantly on its home page, ‘What *won’t* these horny chics do to pay for college?’ Well, from what I saw, few things appear to be off limits, and ALL of them were living in my hard drive. Oh, trouble, trouble in files!

Now, the Hebrew Bible has a lot to say about the sexual goings-on attributed to the daughters of the chosen people, but its usually a metaphor about how MEN ‘play the harlot’ after strange gods. It not only expressed God’s disgust at being ‘cheated on’, but also shames the targeted male population by comparing their behavior to that of women—a big no-no in patriarchal ideology. Yes, I’ve got my Isaiah passages (3:16-4:1) that would allow me to condemn every one of those females disporting themselves for my viewing pleasure. But should the Bible reading stop there? I don’t think so. We have to ask: WHY are young women so totally disassociated from their bodies that they think work in the sex trade is a good deal? WHY are they so in need of money to fund their educations?

Because they are the daughters of the poor, that’s why.

Now, I’ll grant you the few kinky girls whose emotional wounding has made them into women who find release in acting out the part of the object in full; I’ll even grant you that sexual fantasies can be more-or-less healthy, and that at least on the Internet, the girls are spared the actual sex act since its only ‘virtual’ sin. But as a daughter of the poor it was my fate to grow up living next door to a brothel, to see the practice on the street, and admire the bravery and the endurance of the

young African American and Haitian girls, some all of eleven years old, who were trapped in that life. I agreed with them that the police of Miami and Dade County were no damn help, and more likely an aggressor than a savior. And I reluctantly agreed that they were indeed making more money on the street than in a dime store, or as a hotel maid, or an unwed mother on welfare.

So, I don't think prostitution is about a woman's right to privacy, such that she can do whatever she wants with her body. I think its about money, and I think its about greed: somebody is getting rich and I'll bet you dollars to donuts, it's *not* the girls who do the work. When I see the girls on the internet, I not only cry, I am furious. *Why* is there no living wage for the workers in this country? *Why* is there no health care for those on hourly wages, no educational opportunities so that the poor might hope to change their lot and pull themselves up by that famous bootstrap? *Why*, in the so-called greatest Christian nation in the earth? Education is the hope of the poor and a light to the world; to deny it is to ensure that the status quo remains right where it is: white and rich and exclusive.

Are there other options for the daughters of my people? Oh, sure there are: only consider the case of Private Jessica Lynch! Interviewed in sickening and sugary detail on television last night, we learned that rather than emptying her weapon fighting off Iraqis like Xena the Warrior Queen, she cowered on the floor of her humvee when it came under attack. My husband blurted out, 'There's no way a little girl like that should *ever* have been put in such a situation!', and I agreed. Why was Jessica there at all? It was *not* because she was proving some issue on women's rights, or even that her country needed her to be there, but because she needed the money for college that the military provides. How many bodies lay strewn across the battlefields because the road to college led through the military-industrial complex? Those girls in the armed services are brave and decent and committed to their families; like the sons of the poor, they find themselves where they are

because they have no other choices open to them if they wish to improve their lot in life.

Somewhere along the line, the social contract in America has been broken and trampled; we hear in Billy Joel's 'Allentown', a lament for the working class—again, boys who went to war, came back and expected some degree of decent treatment and a job with a living wage that let them fulfill their family responsibilities with dignity. Now, we ask for the bodies of the daughters, too; the street or the internet or the military option. What kind of choice is that?

For the cynic, its amusing to see the knots our government gets tied in when it tries to reserve morality to itself while condemning the same actions in others: ah, yes, those wicked Iraqis showing photos of dead bodies of our dead, parading our wounded captives before the camera! Tsk-tsk....! But what is it when the Pentagon sets out to rescue Jessica with a full camera crew at hand, films her distress, and makes up lies to turn her 'story' into a bigger, brighter picture of how well we are doing as conquerors? The exploitation of Jessica Lynch has its analog on the Internet: she is displayed for to our voyeuristic sight, to pump up our conviction, to 'strengthen our resolve'.

I invite you, dearly beloved, to strengthen YOUR resolve, to take up YOUR Bible and to challenge at every opportunity what is being done in your name. This is no namby-pamby faith to which we lay claim: this really *is* a battle for the world, for the Bible, and a vision of a compassionate God! Do what you have to, do what you must: stand like Gandalf on the Bridge at Kazak-dum, look on the face of evil and say '*You shall NOT pass!*' Do nothing, and you will surely have 'trouble in mind'.

This time around, there can be no 'passing by on the other side'. You are the neighbor to Jessica, to the dead whose flag-draped coffins are not allowed to be shown on U.S. television, to all those sucking chics on the Internet. You must act, and act on the strength of your faith. This is no time for sitting idly by.

In the midst of this, remember that the Lord of Hosts has provisioned you well: do we *have* a more useful, a more trustworthy ally than that discordant Bible with all its voices, singing out in all times and places? Is there a better way to fight fire than with fire? How shall we challenge those who want to tell us its about winning, that its time to 'Bring 'em on'?

Just read 'em the Bible, my friends. Here's a text from Matthew 7, for starters:

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits. "Not every one who says to me, Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.' (Mt 7:15-23)

'They don't call it the Good Book for nothin'! Here, beloved, is your remedy for trouble in mind!

Amen