

Jane Esdale

Stories of Faith

November 24, 2002

Portions of Hebrews 11

One Voice: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith, Abraham and Sarah obeyed when they were called to set out for a place that they were to receive as an inheritance; and they set out not knowing where they were going. All: By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth. One Voice: By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughters, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God.

All: By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land.

One Voice: By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish because she had received the spies in peace.

All: By faith Andrew and Peter left their nets and became disciples of Jesus. By faith, Matthew left his lucrative tax collecting business and followed Jesus.

One Voice: By faith Dorothy Day gave away her wealth to feed unemployed people in New York City during the great Depression.

All: By faith, Mohandes Gandhi left his position of power to lead millions of fellow citizens of India in the non-violent struggle for independence.

One Voice: By faith, Martin Luther King, Jr. led a campaign in our country so that all of God's children might be treated equally.

All: Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that easily distracts, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

One Voice: Consider Jesus who endured such hostility against himself from sinners so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

All: Pursue peace with everyone.

Adapted from Hebrews 11

## Presente!

"Presente!" Spanish for "Here!" A simple word, spoken by children in classrooms every day when I was a child -- to let the teacher know we were in our seats and ready to begin our work. "Presente!" -- echoed in the crisp fall air.

"Presente!" chanted by 10,000 people for three hours at Fort Benning, in Columbus, Georgia, on Sunday, November 17, 2002. The sound, and what it meant, still remains in my heart.

"Presente!" was our response to each name sung in remembrance of all the Latino and Latina people who had died at the hand of Latin American soldiers trained right here in the United States. Babies. Mothers. Old women. Young men. Children. "Jose Ortiz, sixteen years old."

"Presente!" Here! -- and everyone who carried a cross with a victim's name printed on it, raised that cross. Those of us who carried signs, lifted them high when we responded. "Presente!"

Every person whose name was chanted last Sunday had been murdered in Central or South America by a "graduate" of the School of the Americas that is located at Ft. Benning. Did I mention that the singing and the walking continued for three hours? Those who had died were present in us as we called for an end to the United States Armed Forces training of terrorists!

I imagine that some of you may be sitting here saying to yourself, "So what? What difference can 10,000 people possibly make against our enormous military-industrial complex? It's a little like sitting in front of a bulldozer. It makes the headlines for a day or two, but in the end, the building still gets torn down to make way for a super highway!"

Sometimes that is true. Sometimes nothing can change the tide of power, especially the power of big business. But consider this. A few months ago, right here in Charlotte -- out on Rea Road near I-485 -- one of the 12 oldest buildings in Mecklenburg County was about to be torn down in order to build a new shopping center. Now, I don't know all the deals made by the historic commission or public officials that may have saved the Rea-Grier building. But I think I do know how much Charlotte needs another shopping center!

Consider another situation: Julia Butterfly Hill, a 23-year old preacher's daughter from Arkansas climbed 180 feet into the top of a thousand-year old redwood tree in northern California where she sat for two years, ending her vigil in 2000. Why? To save that tree and others in the same ancient forest.

You see, Pacific Lumber, owned by Maxxam Corporation, hired lumberjacks to clear the area. "Faced with wind and rain, threats of physical violence, and constant harassment from guards sent by...Pacific Lumber, this young woman demonstrated remarkable courage and dedication....Hill's account is an inspiring reminder that we can create an arena for powerful spiritual and moral witness wherever we are." (from a book review Copyright 2000 Gale Group found online).

In a speech given after her two-year vigil, Julia said: "I knew that if I continued to debate politics and science -- and stayed in the mind instead of the heart and the spirit, it would always be about

once side versus the other. We all understand love, however; we all understand respect, we all understand dignity, and we all understand compassion up to a certain point.

"But how could I convince the loggers to transfer those feelings that they might have for a human being to the forest? And how could I get them to let go of their stereotypes of me? Because in their mind, I was a treehugging, granola eating, dirty, dreadlocked hippie environmentalist."

Julia's perseverance changed the fate of and kept that one forest safe from destruction, She prevented that redwood forest from becoming part of our ever-disappearing green space. Those 1,000 year-old trees will continue to provide oxygen to support other life, probably for centuries to come.

Now, some of you may be saying to yourselves, "but what importance do these stories have for me? How can I relate to protest vigils, to campaigns to save old buildings or even an old forest? I'm a member here at Wedgewood. I pretty much get my spiritual needs met. I have friends here. Sure, I don't always agree with everything we do. In fact, if I thought it would be okay, I might speak up when I wish we were doing other things. But I already have too much on my plate without getting involved in some cause or another."

To be truthful, peacemaking may NOT be your cause. Environmental issues may not float your boat. How about issues related to justice, then? How about when we take a stand that says that people who happen to be gay and lesbian are welcome here at Wedgewood? Not only welcome, but invited into full participation in the life of our church! How about when our pastor or another ordained clergy actually asks God's blessing on a gay union here at Wedgewood? What about when a friend or neighbor condemns Wedgewood for being so welcoming? Do we say a word then?

How about when we provide a warm place to sleep for men, women and children who can't earn enough money to find affordable apartments in Charlotte? Do you know that an "average," 950 square foot, two-bedroom apartment in Charlotte starts at about \$650 a month -- that is if you can afford the security deposit, and whatever deposits you need to turn on your utilities, not to mention have a telephone? Do you realize that people have to earn over \$27,000 a year to afford this minimal housing? More importantly, do you know that in this neighborhood -- and in neighborhoods all over our city, people who would otherwise be homeless themselves, are staying with friends and relatives? Do you then contact your city council member to encourage more low-cost housing be built in Charlotte for people with limited incomes?

Okay, I'll step down from my community involvement soapbox now. There are so many issues: not enough tutors for kids who need help, not enough food or jobs that pay enough for people to live on, I don't have time today to keep preaching about them.

But let's look right here at Wedgewood for things to do.

How about our youth? How about their need for lots of role models who live out their Christian faith? Do we leave this role modeling to the dedicated few who teach them on Sunday mornings and guide them in their youth group? Or can we help out in some way from time to time?

How about our homebound members? Is it only the responsibility of their particular deacon -- and of course, our pastor Chris to visit, to call, to offer help?

What about our less-popular needs: for assistance with cleaning the buildings? For answering the phone? For killing weeds outside and cleaning walls inside? And preparing church meals? And cleaning up afterwards? And knocking down spider webs in doorways? And increasing our financial commitment?

How about our small numbers in church on Sunday morning? Is it again only the job of Chris Ayers and our deacons to invite, invite, invite others to church?

Do we really think that a small ad in The Observer and a yellow pages guide will do the entire job? Of course these help, and many times people do call here because they found our web page. But time and time again, church growth studies point out that it is WORD OF MOUTH. Please repeat the phrase with me: "WORD OF MOUTH" that convinces others to attend a new church. I found out about Wedgewood Baptist Church from a store clerk at the Cokesbury Book Store on Tyvola nearly 7 years ago. I look around and know that many of you are here today because someone ELSE from Wedgewood gave you the good news about our church being a welcoming, open environment. That meant something important to you.

You, too, can be an activist. You can choose just one small act, beyond all you do already, that will make a difference in the life of our faith community. About two years ago when we first created our colored brochure telling all about our church, I told my husband and Chris that I would be willing to bake cookies if someone wanted to call on new families to welcome them to our neighborhood. All we needed to do was check out the real estate sales information in the paper. Then make a visit to new residents and tell them about Wedgewood.

I never followed up on that. But I'm still willing to do it. In fact, I promise that in January 2003, I will organize a meeting for anyone interested in forming this kind of ministry at Wedgewood. We'll need cookie-bakers, someone to check the property sales, and people willing to visit newcomers and get their names. We may need more than that. We can talk about it when we meet. We can consider it a ministry of hospitality...We can try it for six months or a year to see what happens...

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days after our recent elections, the words of Dorothy Day founder of the Catholic Worker Movement kept circulating in my head, giving me a measure of hope by reminding me that I can do little things. Dorothy Day said, "It's the little things that we possess our little faith, our little deeds." "These are our loaves and fishes. We can but offer them to God and pray that God will make the increase." If ever we need to keep offering ourselves to the work of making a

difference in our world and praying that God will make the increase in what we offer, now is the time.

Today we may be tempted to give in to those who seek war against Iraq no matter what. But if we are to be faithful to our call to seek peace rooted in justice, we cannot allow discouragement to keep us from standing and speaking and witnessing for peace. Today we may be tempted to allow huge corporations to continue polluting our air -- already the worst in the Carolinas. Today we may want to keep silent about issues of justice when people like Franklin Graham call Islam "an evil religion," or when friends accuse us of being unChristian because we love and accept people whose sexual orientation is not like ours. But now is the time to say "Presente!"

We must keep phoning, writing and visiting those who represent us in government. We must stand with our Muslim brothers and sisters who are seen as the enemy. We must educate our family and friends about the economics that have brought us to a time and place of wanting to control Iraq in order to lower the price of oil.

We must continue to feed and clothe and offer healing support to people disenfranchised by those who "have" in our country. Our work is not part of a political agenda, after all. Our work is rooted in our faith in Jesus as a nonviolent peacemaker who took action to change people's attitudes and practices. We must be present to make a difference, if we are to be true to following Jesus.

Our work is life-sustaining. Every little action, every little deed we do that shows God's love has the potential to change people's hearts and lives. Remember the words of Julia Butterfly Hill: "We all understand love...we all understand respect, we all understand dignity, and we all understand compassion...." Her presence and her action brought attention to a cause and ultimately made a difference.

So can we as a tiny and mighty community of faith! "Presente!" -- I say. Join me in saying "Presente!" So be it. Amen.