

CONCERN AMERICA SPEAKER PRESENTATION
WELLINGTON AVENUE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, SEPTEMBER 24, 2006
“Solidarity: Hope Between People Worlds Apart”

Our reading this morning is from Mark, 9:30-37, and contains a couple of phrases from Jesus that are familiar to many; I will return to these shortly.

Read Mark here

The title of my sermon this morning is “Solidarity: Hope Between People Worlds Apart.” Too often after listening to the news, or reading about any one of the many natural disasters, poverty, hunger, etc. around the world today and their causes, I become overwhelmed and find myself throwing up my hands in the face of so much suffering and oppression. I get depressed over the suffering, and angry about the causes and George W. Bush, but these feelings, unfortunately, are not constructive, and too often keep me from doing anything.

How to break out of these moments of helplessness? In the last few years, I have found that turning to stories of hope in each of these horrible situations, both from my own experiences and those of others, gets me back on track with the energy and hope to do something. And for me, these stories are a very powerful tool for building solidarity between myself and any number of people or groups around the world. I will also share with you about Concern America, an organization with which Cat and I have been involved for close to 10 years that continues to bring hope to me and to thousands of others in this country, Latin America, and Africa, and to invite you this morning to become more involved in our work.

The word Solidarity comes from the French, *solidarité*, and means “interdependent.” In other words, that my well being is inextricably tied to yours, and in our faith community, we must always be attentive to our interdependence. And for there to be peace in this world of ours, this sense of solidarity must extend between diverse group both here in Chicago and around the world, not just among ourselves. We know this well at Wellington, as we continue to be active in the sanctuary movement, we have an active outreach

committee, and as our members travel to countries like Colombia to witness to peace and justice. As Mark tells us, we be a “servant to all.”

In an attempt to quantify this morning what a commitment to solidarity means for us, I believe there are three things that we must do: Understand the Reality of Others, Understand Ourselves, and Recognize our Common Humanity.

The first component of solidarity, the need to Understand the Reality of Others, takes time and an open heart and mind. We all know that stereotypes can be hurtful both to ourselves and those we are stereotyping, and are based on a lack of understanding of others. Take undocumented immigrants, for example, or as they are often termed, “illegal immigrants.” We have the vigilante Minutemen on the border between Mexico and the U.S.A. trying to stop them from entering this country; there is talk of building a wall on the border; how often are these immigrants blamed for taking away jobs or bankrupting social service budgets; even this naming of a person as “illegal” is a classic blame the victim scenario. Throughout the four years Cat and I lived in Central America, it was hard to find a family without someone in the States sending home money. Many towns that were previously devoid of men because of the civil wars in Central America of recent past are once again too often without men as they are now in the North fighting their own war on poverty. Coming to the States for them is all about the opportunity to provide for their families.

An immigrant story unfolding in our midst is that of Elvira Arellano and her son who continue to take refuge in a church in Humboldt Park in defiance of her scheduled deportation back to Mexico. Ms. Arellano came to this country illegally, like so many immigrants, escaping poverty in her home country. She worked for five years cleaning at O’Hare Airport, but was arrested in 2002 in a post-9/11 security sweep. The news on Ms. Arellano focuses on her illegal status, and that she has a son born here and is a U.S. citizen. This is all true, but what we don’t hear is that she is the president of United Latino Family, a group she organized to help immigrants keep their families together. She is also active in many immigrant rights activities.

Learning about Ms. Arrellano reminds me of Rosa Parks who is typically portrayed as a tired African American woman who refused to give up her seat on a bus. What we aren’t often taught in school is that Rosa Parks was the secretary of her NAACP chapter, and had attended the Highlander Folk School in

Tennessee along with Martin Luther King and other Civil Right's leaders. She was not an accident of history, but an intentional activist. Ms. Arrellano is an immigrant right's activist, with a story of struggle to provide for herself and her family, and someone we can support by learning about her story. And remember, if our realities were switched like in a Twilight Zone episode I would probably risk my life to travel to El Salvador, or Nicaragua, to be able to send home money to my wife and two children back in Chicago.

This leads me to my second component of solidarity: Understanding Oneself. In my own life, like many young people, as I grew up I developed a real desire to travel and work in another country. In my junior year of high school, my mother Ruth, a lab technician, and I traveled to Honduras on a medical mission trip. We arrived at the first community we visited after driving for what seemed like an eternity through banana fields. We set up in the existing government clinic while hundreds of people were lined up outside. All children received deworming medicines; dentists out back pulled teeth; meds were given out in our makeshift pharmacy; and I learned to read hemoglobin tests and took the temperature of everyone who entered. I learned a lot about myself on that trip: I found my calling to learn Spanish and to return south again, but I also learned how not to "support" impoverished peoples. Bringing a group of gringos with medicines into an area and spending two weeks treating hundreds of people was possibly good for them for that short time, but what next for those people? What happened after we left? We didn't help support local health efforts, or help build health related infrastructure, and on another level we reinforced the stereotype that only people from the outside like gringos can solve their problems.

The deeper lessons of the trip didn't hit me until years later when I found myself for the first time on the receiving end of charity. I live on a block in the Logan Square neighborhood that, like most neighborhoods in the City, is experiencing gentrification, though there are still many long term residents, mostly latino. One day I answered the door to find a white teenager with a clipboard. She explained that she was with an urban social service organization in the area and that our block was chosen to receive a free block party for our kids. She showed me the signatures of my neighbors who agreed to it, and asked for mine as well. I explained that I would be happy to sign, but that we had a block club and such decisions were made collectively during our meetings. I also told her that we held our own block party the year before, and that I was sure together we could do a nice event. She said: "but we do everything and this is free." I felt very

strange after our encounter: I had never before been the object of charity, growing up as I did in a middle class family, and I was angry that this person and her organization thought that I was somehow incapable of providing for my own family, or that our block could not hold our own party; I was disturbed that the young woman from the suburbs didn't really want to get to know me and my kids, or to collaborate on this event....she wanted to give this to us, the poor city kids whose families can't give them such treats. When the date for the party came and went, there was no party, no call, no apology, and no follow up. Thinking back, I wonder how the Hondurans felt about the healthcare I was offering to them? Why did I go in the first place?

This leads me to my third component of solidarity: the need to Understand our Common Humanity, and a person that has challenged me a lot recently to listen others, to see myself in them, and to act is Kathy Kelly. As most of us know, Kathy is cofounder of Voices in the Wilderness, now known as Voices for Creative Nonviolence, and has spent years in Iraq bringing medical supplies and accompanying Iraqis despite the U.S.A. embargo and ongoing U.S.A. aggression in that country. She has been a peace activist for years and has been jailed many times for speaking the truth and standing against violence. And unlike my trip to Honduras, Kathy's work is always about building local capacity, to support local efforts in Iraq, based on what the Iraqi's themselves want.

This story that I will read is known by many of you but I think is worth retelling, and was told by Kathy, in Studs Terkel's book, *Hope Dies Last: Keeping the Faith in Troubled Times*, about a protest of hers at a nuclear weapon silo. [story in Hope Dies Last 321-324]. I can't deliver the story like Studs did last year here at the Betty Benson event!

Kathy has an amazing way of seeing herself and her common humanity with others as diverse as soldiers and women in prison. Much like Jesus as told in Mark this morning when he placed a child among his disciples saying "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." In Jesus' day, children were at the bottom rung of a family, of society, and Jesus' actions turned the status quo of the day on its head by holding up children.

How did I see the Hondurans and the Guatemalans that I went to help when my Cat and I lived in Central America, and why did we go? Did we go because it made us feel good? Did we go to offer a skill or service that was lacking in their communities? Did we go to learn about the people of those countries? A bit of all of these is probably true, but ultimately, if I see myself in solidarity with people from another country, or culture, or reality, in other words that I 1) understand some of their reality, 2) that I am in touch with my motives for being with them, and 3) I recognize what we have in common, then together we can make the world better. It is within this context that I really honor and respect the work of Concern America, the international development and refugee aide organization with which Cat and I were field volunteers in Guatemala for two years, and with which we have been involved since 1997, and with which Curt Wands, a dear friend to Wellington, is currently working in rural Colombia. Concern America's approach to community development has taught me a lot about how I approach helping others both in this country and abroad.

Utilizing a methodology espoused by the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, Concern America puts the community at the center of every project. In the beginning, this means that every project or activity begins with an invitation by the community itself: we are their guests, and not the experts swooping in to solve their problems because they can't. Second, our job as community development workers is to listen to the community: in their homes as we share meals; in their markets; at their places of worship; on the road; in their milpas, or corn fields; washing clothes in the river; riding on tops of buses; etc. Our job then is to build, together with the community, projects that they themselves have identified as important, and not push a preconceived plan or agenda. Anne Hope, a community development worker in Kenya, tells of one community and how this methodology worked. Upon arrival in the community, it was readily obvious to her that the community lacked potable water, health care, basic sanitation, and much more. Where to start? The theme that came up more than any other in this community, however, was their hope for a soccer field. Being an experienced development worker, she helped the community realize its dream. Soon after building the field as a community, the youth formed teams, began to travel and compete with other villages, and the entire community came out to support their children. This was the first collective success of the community, which then turned its sights to other needs. By listening to the community, and recognizing that they are most certainly the best experts on their own lives, she was able to help make a sustainable difference in the

lives of that community. Had she not listened to them and not supported their dream but instead had pushed to build a water system first, I would bet that neither the water system or the soccer field would have succeeded.

This method also builds trust between all involved, based on mutual respect, both of which are key ingredients for building relationships of solidarity between peoples, especially in regions of conflict. Through an invitation by a local Catholic diocese, Concern America began a health training project in Northwest Colombia in 2004, where Curt Wands works. As we know well through those of you here who have traveled to Colombia and have had life changing experiences (and join John and Gerald after the service today for stories from their recent trips there), the country has been embroiled in a civil war that continues to this day to cause the death and kidnapping of more than 3,000 people a year, most of whom are civilians and civilian leaders such as church workers, community health workers, and union members. Travel is expensive and dangerous in this region of the country that is accessible mostly by boat. In such an area, with constant threats and displacement of communities, having locally trained primary healthcare providers brings hope a decent health care to thousands of people. In a recent field report, Curt wrote: *"So, in the midst of this [violence], the Health Promoters are life-savers and spirit-savers. They can diagnose and treat the vast majority of the infectious, chronic or endemic diseases of their villages and can initiate and motivate programs to prevent them. In the best of cases they can fight the system and get a patient with a serious injury or illness into the hospital. They are a hope for their village and for our world. Because of that very reason Health Promoters can be targets of those who want to see society controlled by those whose interests in health are not at the forefront. And, of course, this is why we support them and defend them."*

In addition to building trusting relationships through this work, sustainable community development takes time. Most of Concern America's projects last for 8-10 years, enabling enough time for local capacity to be built. It is within this context that our field volunteers, all non-salaried professionals in their field, serve for a minimum of two years to teach and accompany people, not to run projects. But this building of skills locally requires much more than time: we need to see that our job in service related organizations is to put ourselves out of work. Though this shift to local responsibility is obvious intellectually, like the teaching a person to

fish parable, but when one is in the middle of the action, it is hard to step back. It took the pregnancy and birth of Quinn to help us see this when we worked in northern Guatemala on a health project.

Cat, as a nurse, worked with the health promoters and midwives by organizing their health training courses and visiting them in their communities. As her pregnancy moved forward, it got harder to bump down the jungle roads in the pickup truck to make the community visits. In her place, one of the experienced health promoters, named Eduardo, who had accompanied Cat during many of the visits, began doing them on his own. Eduardo is great with people and is a skilled clinician. I even have some of his handy work on my left index finger, in which after an accident with a machete while I was off with a friend weeding his corn field, Eduardo was the person who sutured me. And this is a man with a 6th grade education who, until he began working as a community health promoter and a member of the health project team, provided for his family by growing corn.

It was because of Cat's pregnancy, which forced her to step back, that a space opened up for Eduardo to step up into, and a local star was enabled to shine in her place. To this day Eduardo is a key member of the ongoing health work in the region, as are the two midwives who delivered our son Quinn who was born in our home in Guatemala. I can still remember how the midwives were there for the entire labor, returned the next day with the traditional roasted chicken soup for Cat to eat, and then came for the next three days to wash our clothes and the diapers, all for \$15 each (which included the monthly prenatal checks), the going rate for the region. Both have received over a thousand babies in their lifetimes, and have been trained through the Concern America health project there. One of the midwives leads midwifery and health courses throughout the department of Peten, and probably knows more about childbirth and women's health than any doctor in that part of the country.

I am not suggesting that each of you move to Latin America get pregnant or have accidents with machetes and move to Latin America to build solidarity with people in those countries, but to think about some "birthing" experiences of your own in the past that have built community between yourself and others outside of your neighborhood, faith community, or culture, and what in the future will energize you to act with others.

I will be at the table in the back immediately following the service with information about Concern America, and I would encourage you to give this morning to support the important, hopeful work of the organization. We are currently involved in health, water, education, income generation, refugee aide, and AIDS prevention projects in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Bolivia, Colombia, Guinea, and Mozambique. And, there may even be people here today looking to give two years of their time to one of the projects, or for a shorter experience, we are just initiating a health immersion program for students of nursing, medicine, midwifery, and public health to travel to Bolivia or Guatemala to live, work, and learn from the health promoters and midwives in those countries for a month.

Throughout my time in Central America and continued international based work in this country, I have seen a lot of development organizations and how they work. Concern America is a real jewel in this world, a small organization that raises most of its funding from people like us, and puts it to use in high quality, low cost projects around the world. For example, in a village of 200 families, it can cost as little as \$40 per household to build a potable water system; the actual cost would be much greater, but community members often pay for a portion of each project and provide all of the necessary labor of digging trenches for water pipes or the stands for water tanks. To put this into context, consider the importance of water for millions of people around the world, for whom getting a single tap stand in their home is a blessing. Take a moment and count in your head the number of water outlets you have in and around your home between faucets, toilets, showers, hoses, etc. Is it 10, 20, 30? Maybe you could give a dollar for each one in your home?

Though I am so different in many ways from billions of people around the world in terms of access to clean water, or language, and on and on, my ongoing personal challenge in life is to build solidarity with people unlike myself, both abroad and where I live in Chicago. Not pity, not self-righteousness, not indifference, but solidarity, built on an understanding of others, an understanding of myself, and a recognition of our interdependence. With this recognition, what to do to act and build peace and justice will present itself: I just have to be willing to let it into my heart and to come out through my hands. La paz sea con ustedes.

OFFERATORY

"Though in the sermon I invited all to give what they could to Concern America as you leave the sanctuary today, we have come to the part of the service where we ask you to support the important work of this church community. Please give as you are able, and as you do, enjoy the music of Orlando Valenzuela."

Sending Forth

"May our hearts be open to the voices and stories of others, and may our hands respond as we build a better world with and for all. Go now in peace – Andamos juntos en paz."