

## **The Moral Issue of Suffering—the Gospel of John** **Becca Stevens**

John's Gospel message this morning really begins while Jesus is walking with his disciple down the road after people threw stones at him in the Temple. Rejected from the flock, they meet a blind man. Jesus stops, even though it is the Sabbath, and makes an ointment from his spit mixed with mud and places it over the man's eyes and he is healed. The religious authorities then question the man and throw him out as well. This is Jesus' response and he says there is a gatekeeper who knows who the real shepherds are. It invites the listener to move beyond doctrinal issues that separate flocks and declares the gatekeeper is concerned about a higher imperative which is the moral issue to care for the suffering sheep, wherever they are and whose ever they are. That is the only way sheep are safe, and the voice of God is recognized.

On the eve of our journey to Rwanda by eight women from the community of Magdalene and Thistle Farms this Gospel is indeed good news. This journey allows us to care for women who are suffering: women trying to find sanctuary and freedom after surviving lives of violence, addiction, and prostitution. Their suffering has been and continues to be a moral issue because they are our sisters. That morality is not confined to people who share our doctrinal beliefs, it is not bound by nation/state borders, and it affects people of all races and ages. It affects all our communities, the culture we live in, the health of the world, and how we raise our children.

Last week one of the residents of Magdalene, our community dedicated to women who have suffered similar trauma here in the United States, spoke to the student body of Vanderbilt Law School about her experience of being the only teenager to ever testify in a federal case against a huge child prostitution and pornography ring. She talked about what a long journey it has been so far and about the guilt and fear she faced in naming the men who abused her. She talked some about coming to terms with being a child of God and dreaming of a future and helping others. For her, the dreaming includes finishing school and going to college and ministering to others who have suffered. One of the Law students raised her hand and asked, "Where do you want to go to school". She held the mike and said, "Maybe here". Those thin lines that some of us still draw in spite of our selves to separate flocks were erased with surgical precision in her words. "Maybe here."

Eleven years ago when Magdalene was created we wrote that we wanted to be a testimony to the truth that in the end love is more powerful than all the forces that drive women to the streets. Those streets are hell, I have been told, and I haven't met a woman who hasn't been raped and who isn't destitute. The Gospel says such suffering should cause us all to stop and make mud ointments to soothe the pain, even if we are at a place in our lives where we feel a little out of the fold ourselves. Over 115 women have graced the threshold of the Magdalene community as residents and a thousand more have come as seekers to help and find healing. Seventy-two percent of the residents have graduated and I am so thankful to still get to be a part of such a flock. In that sheepfold people share the role of shepherding, we get to talk about the freedom of forgiveness we have known, how mercy runs deeper than abuse, and about how we have to learn to love without judgment each day.

A month ago Katrina Davidson, Susan Sluser, and I drove to Tuscaloosa, AL to preach, teach and sell our natural bath and body care products to an Episcopal Church.

They welcomed us through their gate. We shared stories, talked about ministry, hugged as friends and even laughed about bath and body care products being the revolutionary tool we use to talk about women's freedom. Driving back I thought about the other churches in places like Indiana, Kansas, North Carolina, Chicago and New York that have already invited us to come and share our story this year. During the drive back we talked about how it felt like we were a new kind of missionary. Not in the sense that we have a new message, the message is as old as the gatekeeper, but in how we are not going out to convert people to a particular fold, but just trying to reach out to women who are suffering with a balm of Gilead and then go into churches to remind them that the moral issue of suffering is the matter of faith to confront. Dorothy Day, a beloved saint, says that you cannot help a sister or brother in need without getting naked first. The moral issue of the suffering of another requires us to look at our own suffering and remember all those who mixed their spit with mud to help us sit in this sanctuary today. All humanity knows suffering. The special gift of this fold has been to witness how love works in the lives of some of the most vulnerable voices in the world and hear their call as shepherds.

So we get to go to Rwanda and make candles and soap and hear stories of suffering on a colossal scale. In saying that we are coming good things are already happening. The Serena hotel chain in Rwanda and Tanzania has sent us swatches so that they can order candles and soaps for all their rooms. A Fundraiser by Bono's group in July in Europe has ordered five hundred candles for their cause; a church in a remote village has invited us to preach on Sunday, the minister of gender and the embassy want to help. Before we step foot on the plane we are learning that we should never doubt that our compassion, our fire for justice, and our moral outrage, is needed and welcomed in a world with so much suffering.

This community is my sheepfold. It is where I was allowed in the gate stumbling always through what it means to be a shepherd. I have learned so much from so many here who have shepherded me. This has been the wandering flock where many of us have found sanctuary to grieve and freedom to grow in our faith. This Gospel invites us all to step through the gate again and care about the whole world and weep unapologetically for the suffering and our own blindness. This Gospel reminds us no one is outside the gatekeeper's flock because he spent his entire ministry caring for the suffering of others on the way to offer his life for the sake of love. For that same loves sake, we are given the gift of caring for God's sheep. Amen.