

The Whisper of God in Rwanda  
Pentecost 2008---Becca Stevens

The recent trip to Rwanda by seven women representing the Thistle Farms and Magdalene communities was less than two weeks, but we planned and worked for months. The Sisters of Rwanda approached us in November to help them begin making bath and body care products to generate income, education, and hope for women who have survived lives of addiction, abuse, and prostitution and I felt pulled to go there. When we heard versions of same horrific stories we know from our streets of Nashville, I was so thankful the connection had been made. As we poured beeswax candles into molds, mixed lye and palm oil for soap, and shared letters from residents of Magdalene to the Sisters of Rwanda, you could feel hope blossom. As we waited for the wax to harden and see what the candles looked like, you could feel the prayers offered. During our visits with the forty-two women of the sisters of Rwanda and the hundred women we met in two villages near the Ugandan boarder, women told their stories in hushed tones. We had to literally lean forward to hear. You knew instinctively though what they were saying and that the message was critical:

My name is Claudine: I thank you so much. If you die, know that I love you. I'm so happy that you came and I could tell you about all my life. I'm a mother of three kids and one grandchild. I got my kids under pain and drugs. Without drugs I couldn't sleep. I thank God for setting me free so that now I can sleep. I'm so very happy that you made this journey.

My name is Devota: I was a prostitute on the street. I'm a mother of two- six year old girl and four year old son from the street. I thank God for his goodness and his mercy, for taking me out of sorrow. I was so tired of life. I thank God for bringing me to Sisters of Rwanda- I have been clean from prostitution for 1 year and three months.

My name is Odette: I am writing to you because I saw the letter you wrote. It made me love you and thankful that you are no longer in sorrow. This has made me think I can make you my friend. What happened to you happened to me in 94 during the genocide war. Even though I was grown up it really wounded me, it wounded me in my heart and I told people I wouldn't get married anymore. Now my hope is one day I will see you in America or here in Rwanda. Peace of God to you.

My name is Virginia: I have two kids Deborah and Wedeka. Since you no longer on the street, my hope is that my Deborah will not go to the street. I thank God who brought me from the pit of destruction. Keep praying for me while you are in America and I will be praying for you.

My name is Monique: My program is Sisters of Rwanda. My friends and sisters of Magdalene, I was listening and your news was so nice. I am a story in Jesus Christ. I am very happy that you think of me. You show me love even though you don't know me- but

you came to visit me here. If I had money I could visit you soon and we could talk together. I was born 1/11/74 on the village Ridade in the south providence. I was with my father and mother until my mother's death. I couldn't go to school because of the trouble with the tribes and I lost my family in the genocide

So I went across the ocean to hear God's whisper. I heard it the whole time I was there, like a ringing in my ears that sometimes filled my head. I heard it in every letter and story the women told. I heard it in the silence of babies strapped to the backs of strangers who didn't have enough food. I heard it when we walked over the holy ground of one genocide memorial where a man looked out the window and spoke in a soft voice explaining to us how he was one of the ten survivors out of 5,000 who were all killed in ninety minutes. I heard it in a church service where a full band was playing and the power went out and we were in darkness with an accapella chorus of people singing, "Let the blind say I can see, let the lame say, I can walk".

On the last day we attended a church service and the preacher started yelling at the congregation in full Pentecostal fashion. I thought, "It would be easier to hear him if he would quit yelling." Then my eyes caught sight of an old pink chenille curtain billowing in the corner over a permanent opening where a window might be. The curtain was picking up the wind just like a sail carrying dreams across a lake on an easy morning. In that gentle blowing there was the wind that has been blowing since God first breathed, and in the quiet wind God was present. I recognized loud and clear the whispering heard all week. It felt like the peace of God and that I could breathe with it, and carry it back across the ocean. We can breathe God's spirit, anywhere, anytime. We can breathe it despite the horrors of genocide and all our unworthiness to know any joy or love in the face of that knowledge. We can breathe God's spirit despite all our collective efforts to try and change the world and end up wondering what the point is. So I breathed in the deep and heard the whisper of God blowing in the chenille curtain in a bricko block church in the middle of Rwanda. It reminded me to surrender control and fear and go back into the world to love it all over again, thankfully.

This morning the sermon is about our journey to Rwanda in light of Pentecost. This morning though we also celebrate the ministry of Ulea and give thanks for being with us for the last two years. Also this morning as we honor all mothers, we especially give thanks and celebrate the motherhood of Dr. Molly Haslam. Because of God's grace and calling this morning we have the privilege of baptizing her daughter, Chloe. Several years ago Molly felt called to adopt and sometime after Chloe's whisper carried across an ocean and this mom and child found each other. There is no greater testimony to how in loving each other we love the whole world and that we are lead into each other's paths.