

Crucified Again: Women on the Cross
For Global AIDS Day Chapel Service
Andover Newton Theological School
Valerie Elverton Dixon, Ph.D.
December 5, 2007

A Short Story

She woke up singing Jill Scott: “ *Livin my life like it’s golden, golden. Livin my life like it’s golden.*” After a long hard season of aloneness and loneliness, her prince had come. He was tall, dark, handsome, rock solid, smart, funny, kind, generous, a pillar she could lean on, a man working hard to build his life. She was thrilled to be part of it. She met him at the club, out one night with her girls. They met; they danced; he took her number; he called and they started to date. It was not long before they were lovers. She was thirty and it seemed that an entire decade of her life had been lived in obligation to other people. She quit college after two years to get a full-time job to help her mother who was living with diabetes and heart disease while rearing her sister’s three children. Her father was long gone, moved to California, married another woman and started another family. Her younger sister, her only sibling, was serving time in jail for conspiracy to sell drugs when all she had really done was to live with a drug dealer after her time on welfare ran out and she could not find a job that would sustain her and her children. An unintended casualty of welfare reform.

Work, Mom’s house, the kids, church, sometime a girl’s night out, was her life. She lived in a world moving too fast to notice her or to care or to love her. And there were days and nights that were lonely to the bone. The loneliness was a chronic pain. Profound and relentless. She understood why people used drugs to end this kind of pain. But she had not. She filled her days with taking care of others. Thinking this morning of her prince, more Jill Scott. “ *Is it the*

way you love me baby?" She turned on the radio to the Tom Joyner Morning Show, and while she ate her yogurt and granola, Tavis Smiley recited grim statistics about HIV-AIDS in the Black community: 67% of newly infected women in the United States are African-American; 43% of newly infected men are African-American; 70% of newly infected teenagers are African-American; 38% of all Americans who have died of AIDS are African-American. African-Americans are 13% of the population of the United States. On this bright late November morning, somewhere on a distant horizon of her own soul, lightning flashed and far-away thunder disturbed her, an intuitive insight, an ominous premonition, disturbed her. She finished her breakfast, dressed, and as she grabbed her keys to walk out the door, the phone rang. The caller i.d. told her it was he, her prince, her liberation from loneliness. "Hey," she said softly, happy to know that he was thinking of her. "We need to talk," he said. "Ok," her reply was calm. Another flash of lightning inside her intuitive mind, more distant thunder. "I'll come by this afternoon around five," he said. "Ok," she was still cool.

When the call was over, she was troubled. It is never good news when a man says "We need to talk." The day was busy and five p.m. came quickly. He was right on time.

"This won't be easy," he said without any preliminaries. "So I'll just get straight to it. I never told you, but I spent time in prison. I used to sell drugs. I was young, impatient, too cool for my own good. The money wasn't easy, but it beat the post office. And then there was jail sex. I got tested for HIV and it came back positive."

She could not breathe.

"You need to get tested," he said. He had not touched her; he had not unbuttoned his coat or taken a seat. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. Before he turned to leave, he put his hand to her

face. It was a soft touch that communicated his regret, his powerlessness, and his love. “I’m sorry,” he said again. With that he was out the door. She watched a long time as he disappeared in the November dusk dark evening.

She closed the door gently, and as she turned to face her living room, the reality of this news slammed her to the door. All her weight pressed against the wood. These facts revealed nailed her to the wood. The pressure was tangible, touchable, hard, willful, irresistible. She forced herself to exhale, then to inhale, then to exhale, then to inhale. Each breath an act of will. Then the tears came. The storm inside her soul that was on her distant horizons at breakfast was now fully present. Thunder clouds burst and her tears rained down a torrential rain. She stood there. Nailed hand and foot to her own cross. Weak. Confused.

The next day she had the test; the day after that she learned she was HIV positive. Now she was a member of the group Tavis Smiley spoke about just a few days before. She was another African-American woman newly infected with a completely preventable disease. She felt betrayed, worse, she felt like a fool. Why hadn’t she asked him more questions? Their conversations had been more about the future than the past. Why hadn’t she insisted upon a condom? She had let her guard down, let her shields down. She wanted to, needed to trust this man. She had relaxed into the smell, the taste, the touch of him. She loved the sight, the sound, the thought of him. She swam in his being. The old people say love is a weakness; it is vulnerability. She had allowed this weakness; she wanted this vulnerability. She loved him well, but not well enough because she forgot to love herself.

In that forgetfulness, opportunistic social pathologies found their way into her body. An underground criminal economy that paid some Black men more than the legal economy, the

prison industrial complex, jail sex all found their way into her body. Her tears, now so close to the surface of herself these days rained again. Where did they come from? They seemed to spring from some inexhaustible source. She kept asking herself: “ now what? Very often when women get this news they react in one of several ways: flight, secrecy, silence, blame, denial . For now she was silent. She continued to fill her days with her obligations – her mother, her niece and two nephews, her work. And now she set her mind to learning about this disease. She learned that both African-American and Latino/a communities were disproportionately affected by HIV-AIDS. She learned that more people from these communities die of the disease even though it is no longer the automatic death sentence that it once was. She learned that while it can be managed as any other chronic disease, that a vampire political economy sucks the lifeblood from the poor so that a few can be obscenely rich and the results for the poor all too often are poor education, unemployment, underemployment, inadequate health insurance, limited access to quality health care and social isolation. All these things come together to attack the bodies of the weakest members in our society. Her tears rained whenever she thought of these facts reflected now in her own life.

The second Sunday in December she was invited to go to church with one of her friends. She would take the children to Sunday school at her church and then meet her friend. The pastor preached about the love of God incarnate in the person of Jesus. Born as a weak and completely dependent baby to poor and powerless people in an occupied land, Jesus came to live the love of God, to be the love of God, to demonstrate the power of the love of God. He took his stand with the poor, the weak, the helpless, the hopeless, the least, the lonely, the lost, the sick, the prisoners, the outcasts, the untouchables of society. And the world had feared him for it, hated

him for it, crucified him for it. He bore the pathologies of his day upon his body, and because he is one with the weak, he is crucified again whenever the pathologies of our time find their way into the bodies of society's weakest members. She felt that if anyone understood her pain, it was Jesus.

The preacher also spoke about the Holy Spirit. She spoke of Holy Spirit as the female aspect of the Godhead. She spoke of God Almighty, the God of breast and womb, of Sophia, the wisdom God spoken of as She. The God who stood in the beginning with the Creator Father God. She spoke of God the comforter, the ever-present God who is always with us, who exists inside us to give us all we need, even more than we need, to give us strength and wisdom. It is the power of God that gives us resurrection after crucifixion. It is the power of God that allows us to recognize our weakness and our vulnerability, but, at the same time, to live fearless within that truth and to still love with a will, to still love with a radical love.

After the sermon, there was communion. This pastor spoke of the communion elements not only as the body and blood of Jesus, but as the sustenance and joy that God wants for all His people. The pastor spoke of communion not only as the remembrance of the death of Jesus, but as a remembrance of the life of Jesus, a life lived bringing sustenance and joy to the world. The service was a balm in Gilead. It touched her soul with the anointing of faith, hope and love. She began to heal.

Some weeks passed before she finally decided to get medical advice about how to live with this disease. She joined a group of women living with HIV/AIDS. The first meeting surprised her. This was not a group of sad women contemplating death. There was much laughter with the tears. It was a diverse group of African-American and Latina women. There

was a teenager and a grandmother; a woman with a Ph.D. and a woman who had no formal education at all; there was a woman who had only one sex partner -- her husband. He was a drug user, and she contracted the disease from him. There was a woman who had been a prostitute and a drug user. There were stories of physical and emotional abuse, of childhood molestation, of domestic violence, of drug use, and of just plain, carefree foolishness, thinking: "this cannot happen to me. There were stories about children placed in foster care because women could not care for them after a while. She learned of the stories of the women in the group who had died. They could not stay on the protocol because of their obligations to care for others, work schedules, or domestic violence.

And then there were the stories of how they had learned to begin to let other people care for them. There were stories of redemption where some women found the meaning of their lives when they received the news that they were HIV positive. They decided to dedicate their lives to educating other women about the disease. There were stories of how the disease had brought families back together in order to care for the HIV positive member. There were stories about how they came together to keep in touch with the AIDS orphans they knew. There were testimonies about how some of these women had been able to forgive the men who infected them. Some stayed with their AIDS infected husbands and cared for them until the husband died. Some left. But they all knew that forgiveness was an important aspect of their own healing.

At one of the session, Libertad, a Latino woman brought in a new CD. It was Chrisette Michele's I Am. In the last song, she sings to people hurting from their mistakes, from terrorist attacks, from natural and unnatural disasters, from grief of all kinds. The Holy Spirit sings through this young woman's voice: "I am Love; I am reaching for you and together we are two.

I am your strength and I won't let you fall and together we'll find one more. Together we are so much more."

The song brought tears to her eyes, but this time they were tears affirming her possibilities, tears acknowledging her new family, her HIV -AIDS infected brothers and sisters, all her brothers and sisters – black, white, red, yellow, brown, straight, Lesbian, Gay. These tears were tears that allowed her to see God and to know without a doubt God's fierce Love.

References

Collins, Patricia Hill. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Gilbert, Dorie J. and Ednita M. Wright, eds. African American Women and HIV/AIDS: Critical Responses. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

"Tavis Smiley" on The Tom Joyner Morning Show. Radio One. WILD-AM, Boston.

29 Nov. 2007

"HIV-AIDS Among Hispanics/Latinos." Centers for Disease Control.

<<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/resources/factsheets/hispanic.htm>> accessed 5 December, 2007