

1 Sermon, August 21, 2011

Texts: Mark 15:16-39, John 12:1-9

Title: "Compassion and Somalia"

Stories:

Habiba Abdi Hassan

Mary, sister of Martha & Lazarus

Aid worker

Al Shabab fighter – winning isn't everything, it's the only thing

Jesus – losing is winning

You've heard a lot, lately, about Somalia and the Horn of Africa. You know, perhaps that Somalia is a place like nowhere else:

A tall, slim and stately people, with fine features

A young population, w. half of the population under 18 years of age.

War, famine, cholera sweeping through the population

Soldiers of factions selling food aid to make money

Lawless place with a rich heritage in its own traditional legal system

Let me tell you some stories:

Habiba Abdi Hassan walked across the East African desert for 30 days, battling hunger, wild animals, and bandits before arriving at the Dadaab refugee complex in northern Kenya. Back home in the Middle Juba Valley of Somalia, it hadn't rained in over two years, and most of her family's animals had died. So she left her husband to care for the remaining goats and set off with her four children on a journey of desperation and hope.

"We didn't have any real choice. We could have stayed home, but soon we all would have died like the animals," she said. "By coming to Dadaab, we stay alive, and my daughters can go to school. We'd like to go back home someday, God willing, but it's hard to survive without rain."

Established two decades ago, the Dadaab refugee complex is actually composed of three separate camps with a total population near 400,000 people. It's the world's largest refugee settlement and has been bursting at the seams with more than 1,300 new arrivals every day for several weeks. Habiba Abdi Hassan was one of those, and soon after arriving was crowded into the lines of refugees seeking shelter, food, and other materials needed to survive the hot and dusty environment.

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The Dadaab complex is managed by the ACT Alliance, an international network of churches and church agencies including United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR).

More than two dozen UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations in Dadaab refugee camp coordinate their work to provide shelter, food, medical care, and protection. The ACT Alliance coordinates a network of refugee men and women who provide self-policing for the camps, often intervening in disputes in the stressful environment before they turn violent. The ACT Alliance, which assumed management of the complex in 2008, has also introduced democratic elections in which refugees choose their own leaders—to help solve problems and ease tensions among those 400,000 people.

Recently, the camps have been expanded and new tents, water pumps and latrines added. Habiba Abdi Hassan and her four children now make one of those tents their home. She insists it's temporary, that she ultimately wants to return to Somalia. Asked when that might be possible, she looks wistfully away to the east and doesn't answer.

Habiba Abdi Hassan is a Muslim, but I wonder how she would relate to today's story about Mary of Bethany, who anointed Jesus' feet. In the other Gospels, it's a stranger who does the anointing. But in John, it is Mary; someone who knew Jesus very well.

Think of Mary, wanting to do some grand gesture for Jesus, something that really expressed her devotion. So she bought something really expensive, pure nard, and put it on Jesus' feet. Jesus took it as something that Mary would save for his burial.

But Judas criticized the expense, saying the money could have been given to the poor.

Jesus said, "you will always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me."

I wonder what Habiba Abdi Hassan would make of that. She could understand great things done out of love. She just walked 30 days with her children, after all, so they could survive. That's a great personal sacrifice.

But she must also be grateful that there are people who do give to the poor. Gifts of strangers sustain her day by day. The poor may always be with you, but that doesn't mean you should ignore the poor. In fact, if we're to follow Jesus' example, we should get to know the poor and the wealthy and everyone. And it helps if we see the face of Jesus in the poor, the lonely, the hurting, the cheated.

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Ben Webster, a Britisher who lives in South London with his wife is now working with Somali refugees who have crossed the border into north eastern Kenya. He works for the Christian charity "Tearfund."

Webster, who is trying to help in the worst drought in that area in 60 years, says that about 12 million people are facing severe food and water shortages.

Webster, who is assessing where aid is most needed, said the response from Western countries had so far been "very positive" but said more money was needed to control the effects of the disaster.

He said: "It is a frightening situation. It is depressing talking to farmers who are watching their animals die.

He said communities needed the means to rebuild what they had lost, rather than constant economic support. "We do not want people to be dependent on aid. We want them to be able to restore their livelihoods," he said.

A spokeswoman for Tearfund said the food crisis was caused by a combination of rising fuel and food prices, as well as climate change.

She said: "Unless rapid action is taken to curb the disaster, we need to expect and plan for more weather related crises like this one."

I wonder what it is about Ben Webster's Christian faith that makes him want to reach out to those who are suffering, and make things better. Does Ben Webster think of the suffering of Jesus when he thinks of the suffering of the sea of humanity at Dadaab camp?

Abshir Mohammed Abdi is 17 years old, and has just recently arrived at a rehabilitation center for al-shabab fighters. Al-Shabab, a hardline military group with strong ties to al-Khaida, routinely recruits young teenagers, kidnapping them from schools and forcibly removing them from homes. Last week, three teenage fighters surrendered to the African Union military force during a military offensive.

Abshir Mohammed Abdi has been made to enforce the harsh edicts from these Islamist militants who are preventing thousands of Somalis from escaping famine.

He said "there was no life, no prospects" inside al-Shabab, which he belonged to for 1½ years before escaping to the camp last week. Abdi is from the country's south — Kismayo — where Somalia's famine is hitting hardest.

Abdi said many there are suffering, with al-Shabab fighters trying to stop the flow of refugees toward food, an exodus that threatens to

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diminish the population from which al-Shabab draws conscripts and collects taxes. Al-Shabab has denied a famine is taking place.

"Even with women and children suffering from drought, al-Shabab would stop them, stop them, stop them until they couldn't stop them anymore," Abdi said last week, suggesting the wave of famine refugees was too much for the militants to stanch.

One of Abdi's friends said al-Shabab also uses threats to keep men within the famine zones. "What they would tell the men is that your women and children would be killed if you leave," said Ali Hassan.

The two dozen young men, mostly teens, said there were killers among them, though no one dared specify who. One bearded fighter in his 20s suggested that he had carried out beheadings.

The former al-Shabab members were strikingly young. The youngest at the center is Liban Mohammed, a shy boy of 9. Al-Shabab used him as a spy.

Most children recruited by armed groups in Somalia appear to be between 12 and 18.

The former child soldiers said executions were a part of al-Shabab's recruitment process, in order to instill fear. Many youths saw friends die.

"We don't matter. We're taught how to load and unload a gun. I want a future for myself," Hassan said, explaining why he left.

What would Abdi and Hassan make of the story of Jesus, who chose to be violently killed for the sake of others? Wouldn't they see this as the exact opposite of those who send children out to do their suffering for them?

Do the ones who send weapons into Somalia really think they're making people's lives better? Or are they just trying to promote their own agenda, their own ideas?

Abdi and Hassan, I think, would be very suspicious of big ideas that drive men to use children as tools, and women as property.

Would they welcome the ideas of Jesus, who came preaching self-sacrifice and love? They've had enough sacrifice not of their own choosing.

Then there's Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed, a former high school teacher who became president of Somalia in February 2009.

Sheik Sharif stepped into Somalia's messy politics in 2004, when he helped form a neighborhood court to try carjackers and kidnappers. Before that, he had been a relatively unknown high school teacher, educated in Sudan and Libya, the grandson of a famous cleric. In 2006, he became a leader of an Islamist alliance that kicked out

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Mogadishu's warlords and brought a modicum of peace to the city for the first time since 1991.

But in December 2006, Ethiopian troops invaded Somalia with American help and swept aside Sheik Sharif's Islamist alliance. An unpopular, warlord-dominated government then ruled for two years before the [United Nations](#) and the United States pressed it into ceding power to Sheik Sharif, because his moderate Islamist party was ultimately seen as having the most street-level support.

"This government faced obstacles that were unparalleled," said Sheik Sharif in an interview with *The New York Times*. "We had to deal with international terrorist groups creating havoc elsewhere. Their plan was to topple the government soon after it arrived. The government proved it could last."

Sheik Sharif has a lot stacked against him, but his moderate Islamic coalition is probably the best hope for Somalia. For the first time in decades - including 21 years of dictatorship and the 18 years of chaos that followed - Somalia's leader has both widespread grass-roots support inside the country and extensive help from outside nations.

Sheik Sharif is a novel politician for Somalia. To start with, he is not a soldier. Sheik Sharif, 43, is used to carrying a compass, not a gun. Studious and reserved, he has triangulated his country's clannish politics and found something that resembles Somalia's political center, a blend of moderate and more strident Islamic beliefs, with the emphasis on religion, not clan. To help, he has assembled an impressive brain trust of Somali-Americans, Somali-Canadians and Somali-Europeans with Ph.D.'s who had been waiting on the sidelines for years to help rebuild their country.

But the clock is ticking. Sheik Sharif remains holed up in his hilltop palace, Villa Somalia, protected by African Union troops. Millions of his people [on the brink of starvation](#) because of drought and war, and each day of violence and hunger makes people more cynical about him.

What would Sheik Sharif think of the efforts of Christians to try to stem the violence in Somalia? Yes, that's good now, but what about the British and French and especially the Italians who invaded Somalia and made war to gain an empire?

What about the way the United States has sided sometimes with Ethiopia and sometimes with Somalia over the years, depending on which was closer to the Soviet Union?

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Would Sheik Sharif, a committed Muslim, be able to see the difference between what Governments do and what Christians of good will try to do?

Jesus taught compassion. Christ urges us to be people of compassion. But how do we act out our compassion?

Some rice, some tents, some basics help in the emergency. But what about later, when perhaps the people in the refugee camps can go home – how do we help then?

UMCOR will keep doing its best, you can be assured of that. But how does it work without a strong government to keep crime at bay? How does it work when so many outsiders have a stake in what happens in Somalia? How does it work when famine and war have broken so many bonds of family and clan?

I'm praying for the people of Somalia. I'm giving toward this emergency. But after that, I'm not really sure. There are some questions that we have to live with, and trust the Holy Spirit to guide.

Amen.

"Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead." John 12:1-9, NRSV.