Preface: Seeing with New Eyes

At the age of twenty-four, I attended a young women's leadership development conference in Jamaica sponsored by three international faith-based organizations: the World Council of Churches, the World Student Christian Federation, and the World YWCA. We were a small group of thirty women in our twenties from all parts of the world; many of us were students, but some were also lawyers, ministers, and activists. For ten days, we shared stories of the political realities of our countries and talked about the challenges that women faced in our contexts. We learned about the political and cultural realities of poverty in Jamaica and developed strategies to strengthen our leadership skills. We ate together, swam together, prayed together, and played together—but mostly we talked. We talked about our lives, our experiences, our families, our hopes, and our dreams.

For the first time in my life, I developed relationships with women whose lives were radically different from my own. A woman from Hiroshima shared with us her experience of nuclear weapons as a second-generation survivor of the bomb, and described life for her mother who had lost her legs as a three-year-old in 1945. Women from Sri Lanka, Lebanon, and Liberia told about their experiences living in war-torn countries, and women from Asia spoke passionately about the growing problem of sex tourism, prostitution, and the exploitation of women. Others shared the struggles and challenges that young women face in their contexts, from unwanted pregnancy and access to education to dowries, violence, poverty, and rape.

But it was hearing the story of a young woman named Deysi that has haunted me for years. Late one afternoon, through tears, Deysi shared her experience of the civil war in El Salvador, which had only happened a few years earlier. A death squad had broken into her home and opened fire, killing everyone there—everyone but Deysi. She watched as her brothers and sisters, mother and father were all gunned down in front of her. She had escaped only because she lay still, pretending to be dead. The room was silent while we listened to her words through a translator. Despite having read the stories of the mass killings and unspeakable torture that the death squads had inflicted on the people of El Salvador, I was unprepared for Deysi's words. In the tropical setting

of Ocho Rios, where we came together on neutral soil, sharing common meals and teatimes and talking about the call of Christ in the world to challenge social injustice, I was deluded into the perception that as young women, the thirty of us had more in common than we did. Rightly or wrongly, knowing Deysi changed everything. It was because of our common experience, our shared community, because we had broken bread together, because she sat across the room from me and I could look into her eyes, that her story moved me in a way that was different from the stories of people unknown to me.

Over and over again, my experience of national and international social justice work has confirmed that knowing people personally transforms a news story from an item of interest into something personal. Developing relationships with people across lines of difference offers the opportunity to see things differently, through the eyes of another. Given the limitations of our own narrow and specific vantage points, learning how to change our perspective can be an important factor in deepening our understanding of the world around us. Seeing the world through someone else's eyes can help to generate empathy while also contributing to a more nuanced analysis of social problems.

The experience of my first international ecumenical gathering was transformative in another way, involving an encounter on one of the last days while we were telling one another our plans for the future. When I shared that I felt that my calling was to help people, particularly those most marginalized, and that I planned to do this in mission work in the two-thirds world, a young Nigerian lawyer stood and addressed me from across the room. Firmly and resolutely, Sola said, "If you want to help me and my people, the best thing that you can do is to go back to the United States and confront the powers of globalization that are destroying my country and my people." I was caught short; I did not know what to say. Sola's words were an epiphany. As I talked with her later, Sola explained that my social location as a US American gave me a certain privilege of voice and access that she did not have. I could use that privilege responsibly by educating North Americans about the problems of global poverty and injustice and challenging the dominant powers of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, which are headquartered in our nation's capital. Because we had developed a friendship, I was able to hear her words as the challenge of a sister and a friend, rather than as the reproachful words of a stranger. Building community together, studying the Bible, and working on tough issues over a period of ten days challenged us to move beyond pleasantries and ask each other hard questions about where we find God in today's world. God spoke to me through the voice of Sola, calling

me to account for my privilege and challenging me to follow the way of Christ in working toward the establishment of peace and social justice in the world.

My encounter in Jamaica was an experience of *metanoia* that opened my eyes to new ways of seeing the world. When I returned to the United States, I brought Sola and Deysi and the other young women I had met with me. They became a cloud of witnesses that helped to reshape my vision and perspective on the global economy and the processes of globalization. Seeing the world with new eyes enabled me to ask questions that had never occurred to me before; questions like: Are there moral limits to corporate profits? Are there moral ceilings and floors that we should place on wages and salaries? Why is it that so many people in our country who work two and three jobs still can't get out of poverty? Why are the products at Walmart so cheap? What is the environmental impact of the food that I buy? Why is it that we have so much and our lives are so comfortable when one-third of the world, or 2.4 billion people, live in poverty?[1] How much is enough, and when does our consumption become morally obscene?

My sense of an appropriate Christian response to poverty was disrupted. Having volunteered over the years at homeless shelters and soup kitchens, I had confused charity with social justice. Furthermore, my desire to move to a distant country and "help" people who were less fortunate than myself, while good-intentioned, served to reinforce two culturally dominant narratives: 1) that poverty is primarily a problem in other, lesser developed countries, and 2) that people in the two-thirds world *need* the help of privileged people from the first world to move out of poverty. The more I researched, the more I realized that these well-intentioned structures of benevolence and charity inevitably contribute to the creation of imbalanced relationships. These relationships allow first-world Christians to feel good about ourselves because we "helped," without ultimately requiring us to change anything about our own personal habits and behaviors or the social and economic structures that shape our societies in patterns of wealth and poverty, have and have-not, deserving and undeserving.

Given the radical economic disparity in our world, discerning how to live with integrity in the midst of systems and structures seemingly outside of our control can generate genuine confusion—if not outright despair—for many first-world people. It is increasingly clear that first-world citizens must radically transform our individual lifestyles while simultaneously working together to change the structures of globalization in our world that privilege the haves at the expense of the have-nots. Developing relationships of solidarity with people across lines of difference—be they differences of race, culture, geography,

language, or class—offers a window into new ways of thinking that can help broaden our perspective as well as generate the empathy that is necessary for crafting new strategies to address the root causes of social problems that continue to plague the human family. The ethic of solidarity developed here is intended to offer first-world Christians a new strategy for navigating the morally precarious waters of neoliberal globalization.

Notes

1. World Bank estimates from April 2013, http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTPA/0,,contentMDK:20040961~menuPK:435040~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:430367~isCURL:Y,00.html