

## SACRED CONVERSATIONS

Isaiah 65:1, 12-18, 21-25  
Conference Annual Meeting  
18 May 2008  
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The Almighty is struggling with rejection. That opening line of chapter 65 of Isaiah's prophecy says it all: "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me."

Being the Creator, the Author of Life, is a lonely occupation. There are mungo frustrations and disillusionments when you've loved human beings into existence and, much as You enjoy them, and are sometimes moved to tears by the sweet and creative stuff they do, they can just make You crazy with their fighting and pettiness, their insolence and arrogance, their capacity for violence and exploitation. And then they ignore You. They figure they know better than You about how to live their lives. Right.

"I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me."

This is the kind of thing that makes a Deity edgy. You can hear it in verse 12: "When I called, you did not answer, when I spoke you did not listen, but you did what was evil in my sight, and chose what I did not delight in." [65:12b] And, oh yeah, that statement came right after God said, "I will destine you to the sword, and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter." [65: 12a]

For anyone in Isaiah's time who might have been actually listening—paying attention—this is more than a little scary. The Holy One, after all, has had a history of poor anger management. Granted, after the historic destroy-the-planet-with-the-great-flood outburst, the Most High did a little soul-searching. And even though the Divine outrage over the mess that humankind had made of things was totally understandable, God developed a little technique, a visual cue to keep in check all that incalculable power and declared, "OK, whenever I see a rainbow it will remind me of my pledge to never wipe you all out again. No matter how awful you are. No matter how intensely you grieve me."

But there have been threats of limited destruction: for Sodom, for Ninevah, and now for those descendents of Sarah and Abraham who have strayed from the path of Life so often, and have been released from harsh judgement time after time, and once again have fallen into destructive and malevolent ways, who have disregarded the One Who was "ready to be sought out... [and] to be found....."

The Almighty is, truly, struggling with rejection.

And then, seemingly, the Blessed One pivots away from glowering obsession with being snubbed, and picks up the rainbow robe, the expansive and gracious mantle that befits the Source of Justice and Compassion. "Here's My offer. I'm willing to forget all our old

troubles; gone; they “are [as of this moment] hidden from My sight.” [65: 16] “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Instead be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating, for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight.” [65: 17-18]

And here’s what I have in mind. This joy of a city, this delight of a people will spring up and “no more shall the sound of weeping be heard, nor the cry of distress” [v.19] the people “shall not...bear children for calamity,” [v.23] but “shall long enjoy the work of their hands....” [v. 22] “Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together...They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.” [vv. 24-25] This is justice in the fullest, widest, most intimate of manifestations.

“To be oppressed,” Harriet Taylor Mills wrote in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, “is to be defined, determined, or put aside according to another’s perspective.” [As Julia Burgos expressed it so poetically, “I wanted to be like men wanted me to be...”] James Cone used pretty much the same definition in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

To be an oppressor is to unquestioningly assume that you have that authority over another person, another group of people. That you can simply write off whole categories of the human race—as unclean, or unworthy, or expendable; that you can expect certain people to provide useful services for you; that you can presume to know and judge the capabilities, the inclinations, and the motivations of others. You have the option of remaining unaware of people who are “different” and the luxury to nestle in the smug comfort that all other cultures, skin tones, sexual orientations, and genders aspire to be just like you—if only they could!

Define, determine, or set aside others according to your perspective. You can only accomplish those things with strong backing and support from others who are like you. Who pass on the tradition. Who have erected vast constructs to protect this dusty yet valuable heirloom, and implemented intricate screening systems to admit all who carry the valid ID—whether or not they sought it—and to turn away those who just don’t pass the test.

Can a person of color be a racist in the United States? I don’t think so. Racism is more than prejudice, discrimination, or belief in the superiority of one culture or “race”—however that is defined—over all others. Racism is systemic, systematic and institutionalized, politically, economically, historically, descriptively, linguistically. Racism is the fortress of white privilege. Whether or not we who are white requested the privilege, it comes to us like an unsolicited credit card that somehow we can’t revoke; no matter whether we have been granted the full credit limit; whether or not we have worked to dislodge the stone of bigotry and melt the ice of indifference from our hearts. Racism—the system—still gives us an edge. Racism—the structure—is designed to give us power over those who are not “white.” And we must in our sacred conversations look critically and creatively at the impersonal, automatic ways in which racism operates. We cannot maintain an unholy innocence in the face of what is being done in our interest.

“Our conversations will be sacred if we pray for the grace and courage to speak the truth in love and to hear one another all the way through.”

There are sacred conversations that will bring us together as persons of all colors and cultures. I remember such a conversation from my childhood.

We lived on Townline Road. Out in the country. Dusty little farms everywhere.

Most everybody’s grandparents came from Eastern Europe. We were Poles and Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, and Bohemians—that’s in “from Bohemia;” although now that I think about it the Bohemians were the rowdiest of the neighbors.

My sister and brother are much older than I am, and had both left our family home by the time I started kindergarten. There weren’t other children living nearby when I was a kid. Summers were hot and lonely times for me. I hated the boredom and duress of picking berries and vegetables, squatting and stooping, swatting bugs and sweating day after week after month.

And I knew that all this effort wasn’t even very profitable. One summer—I was maybe just out of second grade, on my way to third whenever the solace of September would finally arrive—my dad was downright angry about the tomatoes. “It’s not even worth the gas to haul ‘em to market,” he said.

I was relieved to overhear this. Maybe we could just let them rot in the fields and I could sleep in mornings or wander through the woods across the road or play with my dog for the rest of August.

But he came back home from his factory job the next day with a plan. “Tooley, at work, had an idea,” he told my mom, his low, slow words clearing their way through the thick smells of eggs frying and coffee dripping in the last moments of cool, before dawn. “He says folks where he lives’d be real happy to buy fresh tomatoes from me.”

On Saturday morning we loaded the 1936 Dodge pickup with old sagging peck baskets of luscious tomatoes. Tomatoes are heavy to lug around, but they aren’t real hard to pick—no thorns, no bristles, easy to see among the green vines—so I didn’t much resent the work involved. As he half sat on the worn leather seat and adjusted the strap of his overalls, Dad said to me, “Wanna come along?” “Does Tooley have kids?” I wanted to know. “Sure,” Dad said. So I climbed up into the passenger side where I’d have to look out through the cracked place in the windshield. But I didn’t care. I was off to Buchanan and I’d be with kids. I unrolled the cuffs of my jeans and brushed out the sand that had accumulated, then rolled them back up.

Buchanan was where the factory was.

We drove along not talking. It was paved road most of the way. The tires hummed. The chrome door handle on my side rattled. As we got closer to the river the road curved

more. Then, when we were just about into town, we turned off the paved road. There were lots and lots of houses, close together but with lawns in front, built on criss-crossing dirt roads. The houses looked like city, but the roads looked like country. “Here’s where the colored folks live in Buchanan,” my dad said. [That was the respectful term in 1953.]

We pulled into the driveway of a dark green house, our old pickup providing the only sound except for a distant barking dog. A man with black skin came out the front door right away, smiling, with his hand stretched out in greeting. The two men shook hands and then walked on the crunchy driveway gravel to the back of the pickup, talking about tomatoes.

Soon—silently and fluidly—people were walking down the road to the dark green house, carrying empty paper bags and baskets, coming to buy tomatoes. My Dad hauled and lifted baskets. People picked out tomatoes and stayed around to talk. Then the front door of the dark green house opened again and a girl of 8 or 9 wearing a green and red plaid dress bounced down the cement steps and over to the pickup. We grinned at each other as I got out the door. We played all morning while my Dad sold tomatoes and the day heaped up its full allotment of heat and bright sun. We were in the house and in the yard. We tore around the blocks with 10 or 12 other kids. We chased her little brothers away. We drank Kool-Aid from blue plastic mugs and made puffs of dust rise by playing Slapjack in the driveway.

When the tomatoes were all bought, Mr. Tooley and my Dad drank coffee in the kitchen and then my dad and I started back for home.

A thousand questions filled my mouth like communion-wafer butterflies. I swallowed all but one. “Why do the colored people in Buchanan all live in just that one spot?”

There was silence before my dad responded—not an unusual thing; he was a person of few words. “Because the white folks won’t let ‘em live anyplace else.” All the way home I wondered about the white folks in Buchanan.

I never forgot his and Mr. Tooley’s unspoken teaching about cross-cultural communication, my father’s social commentary, or the delight of that day in Buchanan.

Sawubona! I see you. I see YOU, dear and beloved child of God. Offspring of the yearnings of the Eternal One. Seeing. Listening. Spending time together. Across cultural canyons and racial divides. Beyond comfort zones. Despite fears. Risking offense. Hazarding indifference. Yet bound for the omega point, “made of nows.” [Julia Burgos] Compelled by the dizzying drawing power of a bountiful Creator’s beckoning to a holy city of “joy and justice.” [Carol Manahan]

“Our conversations will be sacred if we trust in the Spirit of the living God to do a new thing in our midst...” Like, say, creating Jerusalem a joy and its people a delight. And it is joy—unpredictable and unearnable as a baby’s smile—that can fuse disparate elements

by its heat and warmth and tenderness into the wildest and most improbable of communities. Transformation. By pyrolysis: through heat, warmth, and tenderness that does not burn us up.

Audre Lorde has written, “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is *not* shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.” Shared joy is capable of sustaining an environment where the genuinely preposterous can happen: where the lamb and the lion cease to be prey and predator in one another’s company, where the Cosmic Dream of abundance and blessing comes to all who are open to the God Who was discouraged when She was ready to be sought out, and no one asked; Who was disheartened when He was ready to be found and no one was seeking. Who has now thrown open the gates to the realm of joy, and desires most earnestly, that we may have this joy made complete among and within ourselves. [*cf.* John 17: 13]

God has spoken the words of life. Amen.