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BLUEPRINT

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“Iraq, Iran, the Bible and Rush Limbaugh: Reflections on Biblical Sharing from Amman, Jordan”

By Kathy Kelly.

Kathy Kelly has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize several times and is now with Voices for Creative Nonviolence, <http://vcnv.org>.

She wrote this article for Blueprint from Amman Jordan.

Spring has come to Amman, Jordan. Poppies and wildflowers cover patches of vacant lots, and an aroma of honeysuckle fills the air. For three weeks, I've been living in a small, family-owned hotel, a place that feels like a second home to me.

I share a room with my friend Cathy Breen. She begins every morning reading the Scriptures for the day in the Roman Catholic Church lectionary. “Oh, you'll like this reading,” she said yesterday morning, smiling. “Here, read it aloud.” I read the following lines from the Book of Acts.

“The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord, Jesus, and great power was accorded them all. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.” Acts 4: 32-35.

Listening to church bells peal today and hearing the Scriptures each morning, I'm intensely curious about how the Judeo-Christian traditions could possibly stray so far from the messages that shaped their earliest beliefs.

In April 2003, Cathy Breen and I lived in a similar hotel, in Baghdad. During most of that month, deafening explosions, sickening thuds and gut wrenching blasts continued day and night. We were part of a small team that decided to remain alongside families and friends in Iraq throughout the U.S. attacks. The “shock and awe” bombardment, followed by invasion and occupation, unleashed three years of relentless affliction on Iraqis who are trapped inside their borders.

The face of the U.S. seen in this part of the world can, for many, best

be perceived as the face of an imperial menace. Defy this imperial power and you will invite horrendous suffering on your children and your children's children. Suggest that the U.S. should pay fair prices for the precious and irreplaceable resources that happen to be under your soil, and you may find your country threatened with pre-emptive strikes. Mention Israel's huge arsenal of nuclear weapons, and you will be ignored. But you'd better not ignore the U.S. nuclear threat. The U.S. President has been clear: The U.S. nuclear option is "on the table" in the current dispute with Iran.

Biblical Sharing, Racism, and Military Buildup

The biblical vision of equitably and enthusiastically sharing resources, even and especially with people who are different from us, seems hopelessly entombed in a remote past.

It isn't that most U.S. adults are bullying, selfish people. Like many people all over the world, most U.S. adults watch world events unfold on television, feel that much of it is beyond their control, and are mainly concerned to take care of their families. Most U.S. adults are caregivers, raising beloved children and in some cases caring for needy parents as well. And like many people worldwide, U.S. people have allowed a very small group of people to wield tremendous power and influence in our society. The problem is that, increasingly, this small group uses reckless violence to ensure dubious security.

I grew up in a very average U.S. household. I can recall pervasive fears that influenced adults who were committed to ensuring security for their children. People feared that African-Americans would move into their neighborhoods and that their property would then be devalued. "White flight" ensued, the fears persisted, and a horrible set of racist stereotypes was instilled

in several generations of white families.

I don't suppose Fr. Mulligan, our parish priest, would have been applauded if, in the tumultuous early sixties, he had expanded on the reading from the Book of Acts quoted above and questioned his parishioners' understanding of security and sharing. Seldom did anyone from the parish where I grew up challenge the racist stereotypes or speak up on behalf of integration.

Instead, the majority of people succumbed to fears, often hyper inflated fears. Caring parents worried they might jeopardize their children's future if they didn't preserve segregated neighborhoods, schools and workplaces.

Equally caring parents in African American families had little choice other than to accept inferior housing, schools, and jobs.

Hyper inflated fears also fueled the buildup of the U.S. nuclear weapon arsenal during the years when I was growing up.

I remember one afternoon, as a small child, sitting next to my mother on the Archer Avenue bus, and asking her about an advertisement on the bus, which showed a bald man banging his shoe on a table. The caption quoted him saying, "We will bury you." My mother laughed lightly when I asked about this angry man, and explained that he was from another country and liked to say this, but that I didn't have to worry about him. Later, I learned to call the man by his name, Khrushchev, and to accept that he and his country posed a great threat to the U.S. During the height of the cold war, many Catholic families turned over substantial portions of their income to help build U.S. military might and to beat the Russians in the race to acquire bigger, better and more numerous nuclear weapons. The cold war was rarely questioned. Only later did facts emerge about how leaders of the U.S. had overestimated the nuclear might of the Soviet Union.

Parents wanted to give their children security, and if that meant building a huge

U.S. People allowed a small group of people to use reckless violence to ensure dubious security.

nuclear arsenal and raising the possibilities of nuclear accidents or nuclear weapon proliferation, the adults would simply have to trust leaders to make wise decisions. Questioning these authorities would call your own patriotism into question.

Biblical Sharing of the Catholic Sisters

Care for children meant ensuring that the children would be entitled to at least the same level of economic gains and security, which the parents had achieved. Visions of a society wherein goods might be distributed “to each according to need” were, well, dangerous.

In this context, it's especially interesting to note that in every Catholic parish you would find a community of women participating in an extraordinary model of sharing resources, living simply, being of service to others, and harboring no interest, whatsoever, in accumulating personal wealth.

Drive through these neighborhoods today and you will still see the old convents, sturdy two or three story building with enough dorm space and common space for a few dozen women. Inside these convents, women organized themselves to maintain Catholic parishes, schools, Universities, hospitals, and social service institutions. They worked hard, but had no personal income. They shared living space, ate meals in common, studied, and spent many hours in prayer and meditation. For recreation, they would form pairs and walk along the streets of our neighborhood. We looked up to these women, admired them, and with good reason.

It seems to me that my generation of Catholic adults benefited from the education we received in private schools at very low cost, and yet we generally didn't try to emulate the practices of the nuns who taught us. Compared to the austere lives they led, we must appear to be rabid money-makers

dedicated to cushy lifestyles and minimal sharing.

Biblical Sharing, Economic Gain, and Military Power in Iraq

Today, a widespread belief in the U.S. that people who already have so much should be entitled to get more is as unchallenged as was the racism and militarism that was so obvious in my own growing up years. And I think that our unwillingness to address it is also predicated on fear. We fear that we won't be able to give our children the same entitlement to economic gains that we enjoyed.

But I think growing numbers of U.S. people share a deep concern that our dedication to caring for children renders us vulnerable to powerful people who regularly insist that U.S. security depends on maintaining military and economic superiority over every other country in the world. People are beginning to ask the glaringly obvious questions that leaders don't address: why are people in other parts of the world so angry with us?

In numerous trips to Iraq, from 1996 - 2003, Voices in the Wilderness members grew to understand the unbearable weariness that Iraqi families felt as they eked out an existence under economic sanctions designed to control a dictator over whom they had absolutely no control.

During fifteen years of U.S. economic and military warfare against Iraq, beginning in 1991, the U.S. government persuaded U.S. people that the only basis for questioning the U.S. led UN imposed economic sanctions against Iraq rested on whether Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein's regime posed no threat whatsoever to neighboring countries such as Kuwait, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or Iran. But the U.S. insisted on crippling economic sanctions that brutally and lethally punished hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians, over half of whom

*Why are people
in other parts
of the world
so angry at
us?*

were children under age five.

Each time I've left Iraq, I've felt the same uneasiness felt when I left a U.S. prison. Knowing I would swiftly, within seconds, adjust to an entirely different world, I've felt sad and troubled over leaving behind people who are trapped and isolated. It's as though the very acceptance of passage beyond the border forges a contract with a society beyond that adopts a "throw away the key" mentality toward those I leave behind. Iraqis suffer ongoing punishment even though they've committed no crime at all. Trauma after trauma has shattered any semblance of normalcy in a country that has suffered bombing, occupation, deteriorating security, and stunningly inept measures to help them rebuild their institutions and infrastructure.

One has to pay very close attention to news about economic developments in Iraq to realize that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have now instituted programs that require Iraq, in its desperate state, to begin paying back debts incurred by the former dictator, Saddam Hussein. To pay those debts, the interim government in Iraq has agreed to cut back on subsidies that enabled every family to purchase cooking oil and petrol at low prices. The prices have already risen threefold and a tenfold increase is expected by the end of the year. Another austerity measure involves "monetizing the ration basket," which means that the meager distribution of lentils, rice, cooking oil and tea once available to Iraqi families will be cut back, causing the price of these goods in the market to soar beyond the means of many poor families.

These families are innocent. They've suffered immensely because of criminal economic and military warfare over which they've had no control. The desperation they now feel fuels the rage that is predictably developing into a civil war. U.S. people watch these developments on

television with very little accompanying commentary that would suggest that the U.S. could play a different role.

Now, as the threat of civil war rises, the matter of who controls stashes of weapons remaining in Iraq grows ever more crucial. If the U.S. military leaves, does this mean that certain groups will take over arsenals of conventional weapons left over from Saddam Hussein's regime? If so, those who lived in areas that didn't control such arsenals had better buy up as many weapons as they can. Many people suggest it would be unethical for the U.S. forces to simply walk away from Iraq and by default allow the country to descend further into civil war.

Are there no alternatives?

I believe there still are. We could assure Iraqis that we no longer want to manipulate control over their precious and irreplaceable resources and that we are planning immediate closure of the military bases we've built in Iraq and are preparing timetables to withdraw U.S. troops

At the same time, we could appeal to the UN to help set up a multinational protective presence involving countries that were not part of the "Coalition of the Willing" which participated in the Shock and Awe bombing and subsequent occupation. The hundreds of billions of dollars the U.S. is pouring into defense expenditure and creation of the largest U.S. Embassy in the world could be diverted to fund such a presence with no strings attached.

The U.S. could urge the IMF and the World Bank to cancel Iraq's 125 billion dollar "odious debt" and to deal with each creditor who believes Iraq owes them money on a case by case basis.

The U.S. could plan to pay reparations for the suffering caused by 13 years of economic sanctions and military bombing.

Attacking Iran

Iraqi Families
are now being
required to
pay back
Saddam's
debts!

Now the U.S. government openly discusses an attack against Iran. Again, the criterion is supposedly whether or not Iran poses a threat to the U.S. or to U.S. allies. But if possession of nuclear weapons is a concern, then why doesn't the U.S. ask that the International Atomic Energy Association inspectors demand access to Israel's nuclear weapons plant? Who could blame people in the region for concluding that the U.S. went to war against Iraq essentially because the U.S. knew Iraq couldn't fight back. Who could blame a government for concluding that any defense against U.S. invasion or destabilization rests in being able to show at least some capacity to fight back?

Alan Dershowitz recently laid out a rationale for U.S. use of pre-emptive strikes to attack enemies in the ongoing U.S. Global War on Terror. In the Plan for a New American Century document, author Paul Wolfowitz, now President of the World Bank, stressed that the U.S. must reserve the right to maintain superiority in the world, both military and economic, General Peter Pace, Chief of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, in his last Fourth Quarterly Review, wrote that "We must prepare for a long war that will be fought on multiple fronts to fight extremist Islamist fundamentalists." At no point do any of these U.S. leaders take time to ask why any person or group would be so infuriated by U.S. policies that he or she would become part of an effort to attack the U.S. Why would people facing off with the world's largest arsenal devise strategies for random attacks involving suicide bombers?

U.S. elected officials seldom press the military and defense establishment to pursue these questions. Perhaps they think that we've elected them to help maintain our comfortable lifestyles and that we don't want them to ask questions about how well we've learned to share our resources or respect the human rights of people elsewhere.


I think back to the nuns who educated us by virtue of their lifestyle and through making us familiar with Christian teachings, and I wish dearly that their influence could be greater, today.

Rush Limbaugh and Iraqi "Scum"

Recently, I gained some insight into a vastly different kind of education, one that is extremely influential in the U.S. I listened, for the first time, to Rush Limbaugh.

On November 26, we heard chilling news. Four members of the Christian Peacemaker Team, (CPT), were missing in Baghdad. A group called the Swords of Righteousness, previously unheard of, claimed responsibility for abducting them and made their release contingent on the U.S. government releasing all Iraqis held in U.S. prisons in Iraq or elsewhere. Anxious to read any news reports that might appear, I happened to read on the internet that Rush Limbaugh discussed the plight of the CPT team in Baghdad. I'd never listened to Rush Limbaugh's show. I'm not sure I could pick him out in a lineup. The transcript of his reaction to four men from CPT being abducted in Iraq helps me understand the genesis of hyper inflated fears.

Rush Limbaugh said that when he learned the news he was surprised that he didn't feel happier. Yes, he was happy, - who wouldn't enjoy the prospect of sniveling pacifists craving rescue by U.S. Marines? But events could take a different turn. The captors could release these guys and with them some kind of propaganda about how the kidnapers treated them well. Rush accepted a call from a fellow who was outraged because he'd read on the CPT website that in Iraq the CPT people have acted as advocates for Iraqis who are imprisoned by the U.S. inside Iraq. The CPT campaign was called "Adopt-a-Detainee." Rush Limbaugh was incredulous. "Can you believe it? Can you believe anyone would


Rush
Limbaugh was
happy that
pacifists
needed rescue
by U. S.
Marines.

want to adopt these scum?!”

Scum.

In May of 2004, our whole nation began to understand what the consequences of thinking of people as “scum” are. At the time, I was imprisoned at Pekin Federal Prison Camp after having trespassed onto a U.S. military base housing a school that taught torture tactics (The WHINSEC, formerly called the School of the Americas). On May 1, women prisoners ran to get me, very troubled by a new CNN report. “What’s happening to our country?” they asked, as pictures from the Abu Ghraib prison flashed across the screen: The hooded man. The man on a leash. The pyramid. These pictures are now embedded in people’s minds, almost like icons, all over the world. Yes, the young men we visited were probably better off in the Bucca Compound. They’d been marched naked in front of women soldiers. They’d been told to say “I love George Bush” before they could receive their food rations. They’d slept on the ground during cold weather with no mat and only one blanket. Sometimes guards had taunted them. But they were probably better off than unfortunate people subjected to humiliation and torture in other U.S. prison centers in Iraq.

In the winter of 2005, I read testimony from soldiers with the U.S. 82nd Airborne who spoke about common practices at the Forward Operating Base in Camp Mercury, where Iraqi prisoners picked up for interrogation, PUCS, (Prisoners Under Control) were frequently subject to abuses.

The soldiers testified that any soldier who wanted to let off steam could come to the PUC tent and say, “Gimme a PUC.” The U.S. soldier could subject the Iraqi PUC to stress positions, forcing him to extend his arms and hold five gallon containers of water until he collapsed. Then the unfortunate PUC might be forced to do push-ups. Worse

yet was a decision to “Fuck a PUC.” This involved breaking the PUCs legs with a Louisville slugger bat. (Excerpt from a September, 2005 Human Rights Watch report published in the New York Review of Books, November 3, 2005).

The major threats come from those who manufacture and sell nuclear and conventional weapons to countries and groups all over the world. Major companies that recklessly damage the environment, using up precious and irreplaceable resources and pouring pollutants into the atmosphere threaten our well-being. We’re threatened by those who refuse to sign basic international accords that would help to slow down the alarming warfare against the biodiversity of the planet. These are the people who pose a major threats. They are unlikely to be locked in jail cells. I don’t want them jailed, but I’d like them to be rehabilitated

When the war makers want to market a war, they can count on U.S. people to “buy” rationales for war as long as the population feel threatened. Adults who shoulder responsibility for their children won’t want to be responsible for placing those children in danger of attack.

But the policy makers create so much hostility toward the U.S. that even a top U.S. general in Iraq, Lt. General Peter Chiarelli, recently observed that U.S. strategy in Iraq creates terrorists faster than the U.S. can kill them. (“The Struggle for Iraq: Strategy” New York Times, April 1, 2006). The U.S. heightens the antagonism that could lead to future attacks without asking reasonable questions about the motives of attackers. And meanwhile, people outside looking in have reason to ask if we really are a society that cares about its own children when they see the statistics about how many of our young people are shipped off to prisons and war zones.

Rush Limbaugh spoke of scum. He doesn’t know any better. He is trapped inside an identity, a daily demanding job,

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one that doesn't allow him to ask questions or raise doubts about received wisdom regarding U.S. policy.

But over the air waves, Rush Limbaugh and his disciples generate hyper inflated fears of Iraqis based on pernicious calumny, much like the racist fears that created my segregated neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago. Back then, African Americans were called "scum." Communists were called "scum." Now many Iraqis are "scum."

What do you do about scum? You get rid of it.

Biblical Vision - We Are All Part of Each Other

Jesus and his disciples faced very real fears of persecution and attack. Jesus' own cousin, John the Baptist, was picked up by Roman occupiers and executed. Upon learning that his cousin was killed, Jesus didn't begin organizing a group that could retaliate with weapons. He didn't organize an insurrection. According to Mark's gospel, he went away to a quiet place and prayed. The next account tells the "feeding of the multitude" story. Jesus and his disciples figured out how to share their resources.


The symbolism of the two accounts found in Mark's gospel unmistakably urges people to share with the understanding that there's enough to go around, enough to share even with people formerly considered enemies, even those who might have been called "scum." Everybody in, nobody out, -the practices of sharing, service and simplicity were essential ingredients in the spread of early Christianity.

I have been thinking a lot about Tom Fox, the Christian Peacemaker Team member who, along with three others, was abducted, in Iraq, on November 26, 2005. Tom's body was found atop a mound of rubbish in a Baghdad neighborhood. Last month, the three others were freed. I've read and reread Tom Fox's diaries. He was radically committed to sharing the lot of people with

whom he lived in Iraq. He must have been acutely aware of the spiraling rates of abduction. An April 19, 2006 report released by 125 Iraqi NGOs stated that nearly 20,000 people have been kidnapped in Iraq since the beginning of 2006. This includes 4,959 women and 2,350 children, according to a report prepared by a group of 125 Iraqi NGOs. (April 20, IRIN News, published by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs).

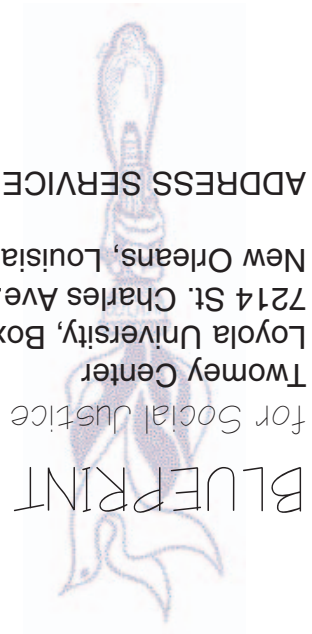
Tom Fox reflected on the risks he would take in returning to Iraq by thinking about Margaret Hassan, an Irish woman who was also kidnapped and eventually killed in Iraq. After over a decade of work with CARE International, a humanitarian relief group, Margaret Hassan knew a great deal about water distribution in Iraq. She knew how to deliver huge plastic containers of water to needy areas around and beyond Baghdad, coordinating drivers, transportation, and contacts within the communities most in need. She spoke up on behalf of people in Iraq whose needs were largely overlooked and in spite of dangers was determined to remain in Iraq, throughout the years of economic sanctions, bombardment, invasion and occupation. She could have left at any point, reclaiming her option to be secure and comfortable. Tom Fox wrote that she lived extravagantly on behalf of others. And she refused to live behind gates.

Thinking of Margaret Hassan and Tom Fox, the vision held forth in the Book of Acts doesn't seem so outlandish. The Muslim prayer call has sounded, the church bells have rung all day, and a spark perists, somehow, calling to life the belief held in the deep heart's core that we are all caregivers, and we are all part of one another.


We are all caregivers, we are all part of one another.

In this Issue

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