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Affirmation

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | May. 13, 2012

In *The Help*, her very first book, Kathryn Stockett brings to life the experiences of 12 black maids working for well-to-do white families in Jackson, Miss., in the 1960s. Recently graduated from Ole Miss, Miss Eugenia ?Skeeter? Phelan, one of the book?s protagonists, is interested in telling the stories of these domestic servants (or ?the help?) from their own point of view. Only with great reluctance and much fear do the maids begin to tell of their struggles to raise the children and clean the homes of their employers in an area of the United States that continued to uphold Jim Crow laws and to insist on segregation of the races.

One of the maids, Aibileen, shares her experiences in the Leefolt household, where she is raising Mae Mobley, a baby girl whose mother is disappointed in her daughter?s plain looks and seemingly slow ways and, as a result, has chosen to ignore her. To compensate, Aibileen takes every opportunity to show Mae Mobley genuine affection and to encourage her growth and self-esteem. Each day she assures the child, ?You is kind, you is smart, you is important.? When Mae Mobley is old enough to speak, she repeats the triple affirmation to the maid, to whom she also says, ?Aibee, you?re my real mama.?

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48
Psalm 98

[1]

Similar loving affirmation is offered to believers in each of the sacred texts that guide our way this Sunday. In the first reading, Luke assures his readers through Peter: ?You are filled with the Holy Spirit!? That pronoun, *you*, includes Jews who have accepted God?s gifts in Jesus as well as gentiles. Even a Roman soldier like Cornelius was not outside the pale of God?s concerns. Although Peter had not yet fully comprehended the universal embrace of God, we can see evidence of the Spirit at work in him in this text from Acts. Peter was beginning to see that just as God shows no partiality, so should all those whom the Spirit has enlightened welcome all upright believers regardless of their origins.

In the second reading, our brothers and sisters in the Johannine community affirm the love of God for us. ?You are loved!? This affirmation bears repeating, especially when we find ourselves or others unlovable. ?You are loved? means that we have a God-given capacity greater than ourselves for putting others first. ?You are loved? encourages us to enlarge our hearts, to broaden our horizons and to translate the love of God for us into acts of loving kindness for others.

This love is at the heart of the third affirmation offered to believers today in the Gospel: ?You are my friends!? Slaves in the ancient world were regarded as human tools used by their masters for their own purposes. But slavery of a far worse sort afflicted all human beings -- enslavement to sin. Through Jesus, who laid down his

life out of love, slaves to sin have become friends. I call you friends, Jesus said. I chose you; I love you. Love one another, remain in me and bear good fruit.

Strengthened by the triple statements spoken in the sacred texts today, we see that such powerful affirmation cannot end with ourselves. We are also to affirm others. They too are loved! They too are filled with the Holy Spirit. They too are friends of Jesus.

This commentary began with words of wisdom from a Southern maid. Perhaps it might conclude with some wise words from another Southerner. The very successful Alabama football coach Paul ?Bear? Bryant once said, ?I am just a plow hand from Arkansas but I learned how to hold a team together ... how to lift some men up and calm down others until, finally, they?ve got one heartbeat and together become a team. There?s just three things I?d say: If anything goes bad, I did it. If anything goes semi-good, then we did it. If anything goes real good, then you did it. That?s all it takes to get people to win football games for you? (quoted in Glenn Van Ekeren?s *Words for All Occasions*, Prentice Hall, 1988).

As believers, we are not about the business of football. Nevertheless, the triple affirmation we receive today and every day from God enables us to come together and to share ?one heartbeat? and to live in daily affirmation of the good news of salvation.

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NCR's sister publication, Celebration, posts reflections on each day's Scripture reading. Here's a link: **celebrationpublications.org/dailybread**. [2]You may want to bookmark it. It's a great way to begin the day.

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