

Devotion, Week of September 17, 2023

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

Occasionally I read something that makes my heart soar with the knowledge that someone or some group has done something truly remarkable for humankind. Between 1845 and 1851, over a million people in Ireland died from the potato famine. I didn't know this, but there was actually plenty of food to eat in Ireland at the time, but none of it was available to Irish tenant farmers. Mostly English landlords had taken over the land and were paying tenant farmers pittance while making substantial profits from crops like grain. Tenants weren't allowed to take part of the grain for food, and once the potato crop failed, the government did nothing to help them. Wheat, barley, corn, oats and grazing land for livestock were all flourishing, but Irish people, even as they starved to death, were forbidden to eat them. The military would guard the produce until it was shipped out of the country. In addition to the million people who starved to death, another million migrated to places like England, Canada and the United States. The ships that carried them were called "coffin ships," because so many died on the journey.

In 1847, Major William Armstrong, the U.S. agent of the Choctaw Nation, told tribal members about this devastation in Ireland. The Choctaw had also just recently suffered severe deprivation. About ten years earlier, they had been forcibly removed from their native homes in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana, and marched on the Trail of Tears to the Oklahoma territory. The Choctaws were extremely poor, with inadequate housing and little access to food. Yet they were so moved by this story that they raised the equivalent of several thousand dollars to send to the Irish people. Irish newspapers published articles about the gift and the generous Choctaws, but then the story was mostly forgotten in the U.S. Don Mullen, an Irish author and filmmaker, discovered this story in 1990 and began working to make sure it was publicized. Many Irish had forgotten the gift, and the Choctaw just quietly confirmed that they had provided this gift from their meager resources because as people who had suffered, it was naturally appropriate for them to help others who had suffered.

Today, 175 years later, there is a strong bond between the Choctaw and the Irish, based upon the gift and their shared history of dispossession and suffering. In 2020 the Irish people sent almost \$2 million to the COVID Indian relief fund. This generosity shows us all that responding to the needs of others is a true mark of Christian ethics – even when the giver is as poor as the receiver, even when the giver and the receiver are from very different ethnic groups, and even when they live so far apart that they have never met. Shared poverty, shared colonization, shared dispossession by these two groups of people – but also shared mutual respect and generosity.

Jeanne