



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5314

First broadcast January 10, 2009

WELCOME

Daniel Pawlus: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Daniel Pawlus.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today, whom you’ll meet in a moment, is Dr. Serene Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary in New York City. She’ll be talking with us about the new face of the American religious soul.

Daniel Pawlus: We also welcome back Michael Siegel, Senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago. He’ll have a few words for us about faith in action.

Lydia Talbot: We begin with the moving story of a man who was one of the “Lost Boys of Sudan,” one of tens of thousands of boys displaced or orphaned in the 1980s and 90s during the Second Sudanese Civil War. Saul Ebema eventually made his way to the U.S. and Chicago, where he is a student at Northern Seminary. This is his spiritual journey.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Saul Ebema: My name is Saul Ebema. I was born in southern Sudan. My parents grew up as Christians and they tried hard to raise us into God-fearing children. I used to hear about the war and we saw lots of refugees pass through my village running away from the war, but really it never dawned on me that one day it would affect me until my village was attacked. We had just finished eating dinner when we began to hear noise outside. People were screaming. People were shouting and there were gunshots all over the place. One of the soldiers of the militia broke in and then they pushed my dad down. They began to beat us. All of a sudden, they got my shirt and they began to choke my parents into pieces. They poured gasoline and burned them in front of my brother and I. Then all of a sudden the doors were opened and some people came in to rescue us.

My brother and I were untied and were taken with a bunch of survivors to a refugee camp in Uganda. There was not enough food so my brother, who was fourteen years, and I had to be our parents. We had to do all we could do to survive. Then one eventful evening my brother and I had just come back from the well, fetching water from the well, and we were kidnapped by the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army, taken, and trained as soldiers. Some nights I cried. Some nights I thought of committing suicide. But every time I thought of that I’d remember the words of my mothers that God will make a way where they’re seems to be no way. Every time I thought of committing suicide, there is that hope that came in that God would make a way.

Although I was mad at God, when that thought came in I would feel peaceful. I would feel comfort. So one day my brother and I decided to escape. When they realized that we were planning to escape from the rebel camp, my brother was shot dead and I had to go back into the camp and continue fighting. But luckily for me in the year 2000 I was able to escape.

Right now I'm working as a hospice chaplain. I'm also doing my doctorate in ministry at Northern Seminary. I'm serving God doing hospice, being there for people who are dying. I believe my experiences of death have really prepared me and equipped me to be offering comfort to the families who are experiencing a loved one who is dying. God saved my life to be able to serve him and I'm grateful to be able to do that.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: Our thanks to Saul Ebema for sharing his powerful story. Now, let me tell you about today's speaker. In July 2008, The Rev. Dr. Serene Jones became the first woman president of Union Theological Seminary in its 172 year history. A prolific and popular scholar in the fields of theology, religion and gender studies, Dr. Jones has spoken to audiences across the U.S. and around the world. She's the author of several books and is an ordained minister in the Christian Church Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ. We're delighted to welcome Dr. Serene Jones to "30 Good Minutes." Welcome, Serene.

MESSAGE

Serene Jones: Thank you, Daniel.

I want to start with a story about the incoming class at Union this year because it tells us something profound about the changing Christian landscape of North America. Each year when school starts, I hold a series of lunches with students during their orientation. It's an informal chance for me to get to know them, for them to get to know me. I've only been at Union for two years, but both years these lunches have been extraordinary and I've been blown away by the sheer diversity of these students. Not just diversity in terms of race, ethnicity or nationality – although we certainly have that kind of diversity—but it's diversity in terms of the stories and the life-paths that bring these students to Union.

On one particular day a couple of weeks ago, I sat around the table with—get this—a former Wall Street executive, a professional surfer from LA, a New York Times best-selling children's author, a Pentecostal minister from Harlem, a middle school teacher from Brooklyn and a handful of students who were wide-eyed, straight from undergraduate programs with bachelors ranging from biology and environmental sciences to creative writing and sociology. Wow!

Not only does this group represent a small slice of what makes Union such a unique theological school, it's uniquely the reflection of the larger demographic map that's reshaping our understanding of American Christian identity demographically. It's estimated that there are huge shifts taking place and at least four new constituents coming to Union are shaping what we understand the theological education we offer to be.

In terms of the demographic map, first there are Latino Roman Catholics with a decidedly Pentecostal twist. Demographically categorized now as the majority demographic group in the

United States—over sixty percent. They are usually under the age of thirty years old, they make less than thirty thousand dollars a year, they have three or four children, and this group considers parish life to be their most central affiliation, albeit in an increasingly Pentecostal form. The New York metropolitan area is home to one of the world's largest communities of such churchgoers but their presence is being felt across the nation through both increased immigration and the expansion of families and kinship networks.

The second fastest growing group that we see walking in the doors of Union is awkwardly named—and I don't like this name—"the unaffiliated." When you put all these folks together it's a group that's larger than evangelical Protestants. They are, as a demographic group, at a minimum, high school educated and they typically make over thirty thousand dollars a year. What's unique is that they do not affiliate with any particular denomination or religious tradition, but they rather come to religious communities for particular religious practices or if they're not a part of a religious community they seek personal spiritual growth, moving between different groups in their neighborhoods, in downtowns quite fluently. Unlike the "Seekers" identified in the 1960s, this group does not appear to be uncomfortable in their search. They're not restless. They're not searching for more stability, but they rather identify their core religious practice as the seeking itself. Insofar as their desires and yearnings are shared by a whole, huge generation of younger churchgoers, they are the "spirituality-centered" students that are arriving at Union's doorstep even from undergraduate programs.

Third, there is the later-career professional "re-toolers." These are folks who are over the age of 50 who, for professional as well as personal reasons, are coming to churches, and like Union, seminaries, and a variety of other religious organizations in search of ways to enhance their lives with work they find morally compelling. Not only do these folks seek out certificate programs and forms of advanced training in fields as diverse as business, law, and medicine, they are more and more seeking more than making money, more than work hard. They've achieved the status quo. What they want now is *meaning*. They want a new way to think about their commitments to the common flourishing of the world they want to serve.

Fourth and finally, the most typical group are the undergraduates who arrive in theological education through the traditional route with majors like biology and environmental studies. Over the past couple of years, the Association of Theological Schools has, at the beginning, studied the marked decline, but this group is now rising in the number coming to seminary straight from college. But what's interesting about them is that they often come to seminary from undergraduate programs not because of their affiliation with mainline churches but as part of this strange group called "the unaffiliated." They don't always know what they want to do when they leave, but they come seeking in a degree program a form of study that will much broaden their scopes and bring them, like the older students we are receiving, into careers of meaningful service.

We have seen the realities of all these new demographic shifts in our student body. But what, if you just look at the numbers, isn't captured in the graphs, statistics, and surveys, is remarkably what all these incoming students have in common. Pentecostal or unaffiliated, freshly minted undergrads or second career re-toolers, our students come to Union marked by a common characteristic: they are driven by strong and passionate desires. They are committed to social

justice, but are driven to justice making not because of a sense of duty or obligation, but by a sense of delight. They are devoted advocates for planetary flourishing, but they're motivated not by abstract moral codes, but more by the motley beats of global music and the delicious spice of global food. They seek to understand how to translate these passions and desires that motivate them and flow through them into action. They want their loves to take public form. They want their passions, their desires to take form in concrete projects.

Now what's interesting about this group of students is their desire for spiritual knowledge is tied to a sense of belonging that while diverse is not completely diffuse: they are earnest in their desire to know, love, and be loved by God. They may come from diverse and unexpected backgrounds, but by and large the majority of them will end up in full-time parish ministry. At Union last year, a staggering 76% went into ministry. While the ministries that they craft in these parishes have many new edges and contours, they are still drawn to the traditional works of a seminarian, serving specific religious communities through the daily care of word and sacrament.

The flourishing of Christian theological education, by and large in the decades ahead, depends upon learning from these students and from the passions that they bring with them. I think we can learn lessons that take a three-fold form from what they uniquely bring in contrast to previous generations. I often think of what Gandhi said, something I learned in these lunches: I need to catch up with my students if I'm going to lead them.

First, to keep up with these students, the Christian church needs to recapture the language and the gestures of desire. As we all know, desire has had a shaky history in the Christian tradition and the folks who have been most active in harnessing its powers today have been evangelical or mega churches. They've grasped the force that desires play in shaping our world, forces that for the most part are driven in our culture by consumer desires, by sophisticated marketing techniques. And now more than ever in the midst of our economic crisis, a desire that is itself in crisis. It's a unique opportunity for theological education to step in, for the church as a whole to turn it's focus not to the glossy cover images and objects that the market drives us to, but to something that's deeper than the quick appeal of that want; something that doesn't tell you what shoes to buy or what car you might be most comfortable with; something that meets the craving that we have for meaning in our lives, for fulfillment and connection to other people and to the natural environment. As these shifts happen and as the church tracks them, it's important to remember that throughout them, desires hold center stage.

Now, in many ways this is a very old truth, one the Christian church has known about but sometimes forgotten. That old theologian Augustine himself said it succinctly: we are what we want. We are what we desire. The task for the church is not to worry about coming up with a new set of marketing strategies or a shinier package to get people to church, but in the end to tap into the deep desires that move people and in doing that to cultivate a passion for the world that is loving, just, and open to everyone.

The second lesson we learn from this group, and a lesson that will affect the form of the Christian church as it moves into its future, is that in tapping into these changing, shifting, deep desires, as we listen to what we have heard about the decline of the mainline churches, to pay attention to the fact that we can't simply hunker down and try to cling to the vestiges of old

forms of desire that worked for our grandparents. The task before us is to figure out how we are called to be in this moment, which means listening carefully to the place in which desires are kindled, the desires of those who remain faithful to traditional denominations, and the desires of those who have not found a home in our churches. Faith communities in this new world need to not just be places of moral obligation, places which instill in us a sense of moral duty, which is very important to sustain, they also need to be places where people want to be. What if coming to church was the most desirable part of your week, the most beautiful thing you've done, the most scrumptious, vibrant, life-giving part?

Thirdly, this group and the churches that seek to serve them are uniquely focused on practices related to the body, listening to the paces and the rhythms of music and of food. They span the globe in their sense of cultivated appetites that are deeply invested in the culture that we see, but also transforming it. Now, if these students are to come to theological schools and find there an education that prepares them to then return and minister to this world, a world that waits for them not only in churches but outside the seminary doors, we need to rethink how we educate. In this new environment I believe strongly that the problem is not creating new things for our students to do, not a long list of obligations and new forms of knowledge they need to invest. They are called to new forms of ministry in churches that seek in them the cultivation of different desires. It's not about doing, it's about delight.

Our classrooms need to teach them to not only kindle their own desires, but to kindle desires in the communities they'll serve. For this task we have to cultivate our own theological imaginations in theological schools. It's a mighty task. Again, it's not about doing but waking up. It's about having eyes to see and to hear what is happening around us and to foster the sense that a faith that can serve as well as a faith sturdy and strong enough to take it in, to truly imagine in this new world the contours and colors and sounds of life unfolding in the presence of God. It's a church that is faithful and bold enough to enter this strange and wonderful landscape where we find ourselves.

CONVERSATION

Lydia Talbot: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Serene Jones, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org and watch the video or read the text anytime.

Now, let's talk with Serene Jones. A pleasure to welcome you on "30 Good Minutes," Dr. Serene Jones! Did you ever imagine growing up in Oklahoma that one day you would be the first woman president of the historic Union Theological Seminary in New York City?

Serene Jones: I absolutely did not imagine this! This was not on the course I had charted out for my life.

Lydia Talbot: We want to know your own personal faith style and how you think you fit in to the mosaic of the new face of American religious soul you talk about.

Serene Jones: Well, you know, daily I am learning from them what are the little pieces of this soul, the desires that it has. I find more and more that I learn more from my thirteen year old

daughter than I do from those historic books I work on by John Calvin and Martin Luther, not in terms of the content of faith but of the form that it's taking. I come home from work and find her in front of the computer listening to iTunes as she texts and Twitters and does her Facebook. The question is: what does a generation growing up with that think of and imagine as God?

Daniel Pawlus: And you call out beautifully the idea of cultivating the desire within your seminarians and really listening more closely. What do you think, in the short time we have left actually, a great church experience looks like? What are you trying to teach them to bring out into their new communities that they're going to be leading in a very new landscape of the American Christian experience as you talked about?

Serene Jones: A great church experience needs to be at its core, but great church experiences have always been. And that is an experience when you go to church you are moved by the Spirit. Your passions are awakened and you leave connected to the world, relationally related and all tied up in the flux of it, and ready for the new week ahead.

Lydia Talbot: Serene, we have 30 seconds, but you say that our assignment is not to do, but to see and hear what's going on in the world around us. Briefly, where's the cost of discipleship in that?

Serene Jones: Oh, the cost of discipleship will come to you immediately when those passions are kindled.

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Serene.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: We turn now to Michael Siegel, Senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago. He has a few words for us about faith in action.

REFLECTION

Michael Siegel: A Rabbi once told a young boy the story of the binding of Isaac; that troubling tale of God commanding Father Abraham to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him on one of the mountains. As he told of the father and son walking up the mountain together the boy became visibly upset. The Rabbi hastened to tell the lad that an angel would come at the last minute and save Isaac. Still the boy continued to cry. "Don't you see?" the Rabbi said, "Isaac was saved in the end." Through his tears the boy stammered: "What if the angel came too late?" The Rabbi smiled and said "Angels are never late. But sometimes human beings are."

How true these words are today. How many tragedies might have been averted if only people were not too late in acting? Perhaps someone else will respond we think. Perhaps it's nothing. Of course, what applies on an individual level can easily played out on the international scene level. The world was too late for the victims of the Holocaust, just as the world it appears is too late for the hundreds of thousands of people of Darfur. How different our world would be if we determined to be on time for the ethical issue of our day, from the person on the street, to the cries in the night, to those who live fearful existences around the world. We have the power to play the role of the angel, and be late no more!

CLOSING

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Michael. And our thanks again to Serene Jones, Saul Ebema and you for being with us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lydia Talbot.

Daniel Pawlus: And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Before we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org, where you’ll find an extensive collection of reflections and stories, on video and in print, to enrich your spiritual life. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may peace be with you in the week ahead.