



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
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Episode 004: Jesus in Kiryandongo

Deacon Deborah Goldfeder on the project to collect shoes for people from the Diocese of Lui in South Sudan, living in diaspora in the Kiryandongo Refugee Camp in Uganda.

Dan Handschy, rector of Advent Episcopal Church in Crestwood and dean of the Episcopal School for Ministry

The people of the Diocese of Missouri collected money, shoes, soap, hospital gloves, and topical creams and medicated salves to send in a shipment to the camp to combat the scourge there of jiggers, a pernicious sand flea. The collection began in August of 2016 and after many dead ends with customs and shipping arrangements, the cartons are headed to the ship for Uganda. (2-28-2017)

Dan: Hello, I'm Dan Handschy. I'm rector of the Church of the Advent in Crestwood. I'm here interviewing Deb Goldfeder. She is a deacon in the Diocese of Missouri, a registered nurse, and also the chair of the Companion Diocese Committee.

It can be very frustrating watching news of every ongoing crisis in the world. We're often left wondering, "What on earth can I do?" We're here to talk to Deb today about the Shoe Project, a project of the Companion Diocese Committee on some small thing that we can do. Welcome to the podcast, Deb.

Deborah : Thank you so much.

Dan: I'd like you to start by telling the story of the Shoe Project, how it came to be. Maybe start with talking about the refugees in Uganda and the jigger fleas that they've encountered.

Deborah : All right. The wars ongoing in South Sudan, it's been going on now for close to three years again. Many people have fled from the Diocese of Lui, [South Sudan] where we have our relationship, and many of them have fled to Kiryandongo [Refugee Camp] in Uganda. It seemed like the perfect answer, but when they had been there not very long, it was obvious that the children and the elderly people were having problems with this thing that they called the jigger flea.

Jiggers burrow into the foot of a person or any exposed area. It could be the head. It could be the backside, anything where it's in contact with the ground. The female is then impregnated and eggs grow inside that area and rupture, leaving a gaping ulcer. These things have to be cut out with a razor blade, for lack of a better thing to say.

We knew about this vaguely, but when Bishop Smith and Debbie Smith went to Uganda, they were taken to the Kiryandongo refugee camp, where many of our friends have gone as refugees. They were talking about how they were suffering from jiggers.

When the Smiths came back, they said, "What do you think about the Companion Diocese Committee getting involved in these things?" They needed closed-toed shoes, closed-heeled shoes. They needed soap. They wanted Vaseline and they wanted hydrocortisone cream and triple antibiotic and gloves to wear while they were doing it.

Dan: Why was it important for us to send shoes? Why couldn't they just buy shoes there?

Deborah : We had a lot of concerns about getting money in and getting money properly accounted for and getting things purchased and also, Kiryandongo is a pretty good distance from where anybody could sell them shoes that would be closed-toed and closed-heeled. Most of the time, they wear flip-flops or go barefoot, so we decided that we could buy inexpensive shoes here.

Dan: I know that part of the way the project worked is we distributed posters to the congregations to encourage the congregations to buy shoes. We were very specific about the kind of shoe to buy. What was your hope for the participation of the diocese?

Deborah : My hope was that people throughout the diocese would get excited and engaged about being able to do something tangible with the folks that they don't really even know most of them. I was hoping that families would go together, that children would get involved, and maybe they would buy a bar of soap with their money.

One family gave a pair of shoes in each size that their family had and would wear, and those were lovely things. The other people didn't want to be bothered with buying the shoes or going there, so they gave us money and I did a lot of shopping.

Dan: Not a thing you don't enjoy, right?

Deborah : I don't, but \$25,000 worth of shoes, you know, well ...

Dan: Right. People did participate. I know that we had the shoes at All Saints [Episcopal Church in St. Louis], and you got a good deal of participation from All Saints.

Deborah : Yes.

Dan: Can you describe some of the people that came and helped you get the shoes ready to go?

Deborah : Well, the people from All Saints were fantastic because they came, they sorted shoes into different sizes, because everyone who sent us shoes have different sizes in a box. They all had to be sorted into separate piles because everything had to be individually counted by the gender that we'd get the shoes, by the size of the shoe, and the style of the shoe. All those things had to be sorted out.

There were a couple of people at All Saints that were just phenomenal in trying to keep track of where things were and how they were keeping them counted and packing them up. Other people came and they cut down boxes. They tore boxes up because we'd get pallet loads of shoes. I guess, altogether, we probably got seven pallet loads of shoes, maybe more, that we ordered out of the money that we had collected through the diocese. They would come and get the shoes and sort them out and put them where they belonged, and then the boxes would go away, and before you knew it, we were through a pallet.

We also had some really, really cute little kids, maybe, I don't know, five or six years old, and they would go up to the pile on the pallet. Those shoes were light, and they would bring a box to a person in the room.

People were really, really pitching in together to do that. People came whenever there was time to work. I'd say, "Well, I'm going to be there on Wednesday," and there would be people there to help, and people came from other places too. People came from Mid-Missouri to work on the Shoe Project, to sort shoes, [crosstalk 00:06:23].

Dan: I know you even had a girl scout troop.

Deborah : Had a girl scout troop. They were very good. The funny part about that was they were so efficient that we ran out of work to do at that time. That was another

funny thing that happened, but just wonderful people coming out with their generosity, coming to North St. Louis, which many of them had never been there before, coming to work with the people of All Saints, and putting it altogether as a holy offering.

It was very hot in there, but sometimes, we sweated our blessing. We asperged our blessing onto these shoes as we were working. I think those of us who work together really, really get to know each other. Yeah, it was good.

Dan: You used the phrase "holy offering." I want you to just reflect on the coordination of effort on this end. How was that transformative for you, for All Saints, for anybody else that participated in? What do you think they carried away from that?

Deborah : Well, the takeaway message, I think, probably, was that they felt that they had done something directly to benefit people that they had prayed for and that they cared about. I think that was the main thing.

Also, because I knew the people very well, many of the people in the camp were my friends, I would tell them stories about "Well, this one's a priest and this one's a nurse and this one ... " They felt like they knew the people who would be receiving these things. It was a different thing than just giving money to Episcopal Relief and Development.

Dan: Right.

Deborah : That's a fine thing to do, but you don't know the person on the other end. This was very personal.

Dan: One of the things that struck me was the hospital that allowed us to purchase the gloves at cost and looking at all those gloves and knowing that you knew Veronica, who would be doing the-

Deborah : The work on the wounds.

Dan: On the wounds and how tangible that was. I know that we hit some snags with Customs and testing and all of that, but now that the shoes are on their way, what do you think the connection will mean to the people in the camp?

Deborah : Oh, dear. I have seen packages come in in Lui when I was there for that six-month period of time. People would send boxes of clothes. I had boxes of eyeglasses that came in one time. I was the most popular woman there because I had eyeglasses. You see people get together, and they go through them and they find people who need the things. It wasn't a greedy thing. It was a sharing thing.

I suspect that what will happen is those boxes will get there, and they will start to unpack them and they'll see how many shoes there are, and that they will go about it pretty methodically, so that the people will be taken care of.

One of the things I was concerned about ... You're always concerned, "Are we sending enough? Are we sending too much? What are we doing here?" Kiryandongo, I don't remember the number, 75,000 people in Kiryandongo or maybe more, but I knew the Moru* congregation. The people from Lui were a small part of that, but I also know Sosthen, he's the priest, and the one who's in charge of the church there, Emmanuel, the Episcopal church there. Sosthen said, "Don't worry. We have a school, and we'll make sure that we share anything we have extra with the other people," the Dinkas who are there, theoretically, their enemies, and the Shilluk, the people from Upper Nile. It was just amazing to me.

I'm in touch with him a lot. I got something from him the other day that showed a combination Bible study worship prayers with 10 different tribes of South Sudan, and he said, "Whatever we get that we can't use, we'll give them to the people who are around us."

Dan: Certainly, tribalism in South Sudan is a big part of the conflict there, and it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say that we've got some tribalism going on here in this country. What do you think we might learn from our participation in this?

Deborah : I always think that what we learned is we are more connected and more a community than we give ourselves credit for, that we need them just as much as they need us. We need to act out our mission in Christ by serving them, and they in turn know that we haven't forgotten them because that's the fear that nobody remembers us anymore, and it's just not the case.

I think both of us, both the people of Missouri and the people of Kiryandongo, I think both groups know that there are people who are praying for them thoroughly. They speak a lot of Kiswahili there, and they will tell you, "Missouri means good," and so they believe that. They believe that the people of Missouri are good and they care about them, but we had people from all over the country who gave money. We had families, other churches.

Dan: Yeah, that was a very surprising thing to see how much people wanted to participate. I think that is because, as you said, it was something very tangible that people could do and not just giving money to Episcopal Relief and Development. We knew the names of those people, and that connection remains very important to us.

As chair of the Companion Diocese Committee, I know a lot of people in this diocese would like a relationship, an easier companion relationship. Something that doesn't take hours and hours to fly to that isn't war-torn, and I understand

the need for that. I understand why that's an important possibility. What do you think that this hard relationship has done for this diocese? How has it transformed us?

*Moru is a tribe in South Sudan. Most of the members of Lui Diocese are Moru.

Deborah : Well, I could speak for myself in many ways, but the way the people of Lui would put it is that a guest comes when times are good, friend comes when times are bad. Being there when times are tough, when people are fighting, when there's a threat of war ... There was a tribal war going on when I was there. Being there during those times said that I wasn't there just doing sort of poverty tourism. I was there because I wanted to be there with them and to learn from them as they learn from me, I hope, and to receive gifts as I was trying to give them.

Dan: Yeah. This has been for our diocese, about 10 years into this relationship, it seems like.

Deborah : 11.

Dan: 11. I know that the missionaries who have been there have said that we have found as much about Jesus there, as we have brought Jesus with us. Could you just give us a short summary of what you yourself have learned about Jesus, about God's mission in the world in your very deep relationships with the people of Lui?

Deborah : The one thing that I know for sure is I did not take Jesus to them. Jesus was there. Their faith is so deep. Their thirst for knowledge is incredible. It was to the point where I went through a period of time, when, honestly, I would call it like being born again.

I'm not typically the one who says that, but being born again into a fuller understanding of how God was working through me and how I had been prepared all along by God to do this in some very strange ways. Learning how to put together a treadle sewing machine when I was in nursing school and things that I always complained about, but there were things I needed to know in order to survive there.

I would see people whose faith was so strong that when things were just dreadful and children were hungry and the rains weren't coming and there were people threatening to burn us out, that people would say, "God is in charge. God's good all the time." I would sit there and go, "How can you say that when your children are so sick and they don't have medicines and these things are happening?"

Their faith was unshakable. They knew that God was in it with them. They believed that strongly, and it changed how I looked at my faith. It turned it

upside down and maybe inside out, and so doing, it gave me a fuller faith than I would've ever had, had I not gone.

My prayer sometimes was, "God, you didn't drive me over here eight time zones away to have me hide in my little mud hut," that I was here to work with people. I was here to have interactions with people.

Sometimes, that put me in what the Moru people thought maybe it was a little more dangerous situation than I should be in. Going to the market and seeing people in the market and things like that without having a guard with me, but they got used to me. One thing I learned for sure, I couldn't get very far off the beaten path before somebody would go tell somebody that I was wandering somewhere else, so they looked after me.

I had described it many times as knowing, when I got there, that there was a murder at the airstrip, the doctors were gone, everything, the nurses were gone, it was me as a nurse and the indigenous people there and knowing full well that I fell into the soft arms of the Moru people who held me up, and nothing would ever pay them back for what they did for me. It's not something like that. I can never thank them enough for that.

Dan: That's a wonderful gift to carry. That's a wonderful gift to know that you've been given. I think the hope for our time is that we will learn to see our interconnections, not only with people in Lui, but here.

Deborah : Oh, yes.

Dan: To see how so many people were involved in that and without that kind of interconnection, none of us ...

Deborah : Yeah, none of us would've done this.

Dan: None of us survive without the other that ...

Deborah : We don't survive without community.

Dan: Yeah.

Deborah : Whether it's here or there. It's very obvious there.

Dan: Right.

Deborah : It's not quite so obvious here, but as a nurse, I always tell people, "When did you ever live not in assisted living? There are people who assist you everyday."

Dan: Right.

Deborah : "You don't have to plant your own food. You don't have to ... " There are so many things that we just don't think about.

Dan: Well, we take shoes for granted.

Deborah : Some more than that. There is [crosstalk 00:18:44]. I know, I know. I'm guilty.

Dan: Any last word, hope for this project? Where do we go from here?

Deborah : Well, I'm praying hard that all of the t's are crossed and the i's are dotted and that these shoes actually get to where they're going. I guess maybe I'm holding my breath a little bit, thinking, "Not until I see pictures of them on the feet of children will I really know in my heart that they got there."

I've been a little cautious. I haven't actually shared with Sosthen and Veronica that they're out of St. Louis because I wanted to wait until I knew they were on a boat and get some sort of idea of where they were before I told them, but I know that they've been suffering, and they've been suffering now waiting for us for eight months and nothing we could do would make that happen any sooner.

Every night, every morning, the prayer is "Please get that shipment to Kiryandongo. God, if you have anything to do with the logistics, help us out here," because it has been a challenge that was unimaginable, how difficult it's been, how many people seem to get in our way.

I will say one more thing. When I got to Africa, the first woman who had anything prophetic to say to me was in Kenya and she said, "Oh, Deborah, the devil doesn't want you in South Sudan," and I remember thinking, "Oh, dear." Now, I've done that, but you start to see more of just how good God is when you see how evil some people can be, how difficult they can be, how many roadblocks they could throw up in front of you, and I kind of liked it and she persisted. We persisted. It wasn't just me. It was all of us.

Dan: Right. Right.

Deborah : There have been crazy visits to the office to get the bishop to sign a check, but we persisted as a diocese. I think that God sort of puts it in our minds not to give up and that it's not too big for God. When people said, "Do you think this will ever happen," I said, "If God is in this, who's going to stop it?"

Dan: Right, and worth persisting for the relationships.

Deborah : Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I'm with you. I would love to go back to Lui. I would love to go some place in this hemisphere, whatever. I think there are people who need help everywhere, but I think when we learn so tangibly, so strongly what that means to do mission, you can see possibilities everywhere.

I think it's wonderful, as long as we're doing things that are good and that people want. We're not going to take Jesus to people. Jesus is there. We're probably not going to teach people very much about God, but your presence tells them everything they need to know that you were there and you were there by God's grace.

Dan: Thank you. I think that's probably a pretty good way to wrap up. Thanks for being with us, Deb.

Deborah : You're welcome.