

A Minister for the Nations

Walter Wangerin Jr.

I saw Zephaniah Kometa for the first time in the lobby of a Seattle motel, where I'd been waiting for the car that would take both of us up to a mountain retreat. We were scheduled to lecture. We might have been equals, except for our races and his great-hearted humility.

Zephania (he pronounces it Zeph-AH-yah) appeared in the door of the tiny lobby, paused smiling, then stepped to the registration desk and spoke. It was curious--it would have been painful, except for that smile--how the clerk reacted to him.

The Reverend Kometa is African, a pastor, a theologian, a citizen of Namibia. He is black in every respect except one: his skin is white. He was born an albino. So his kinky hair is straw-yellow, and his eyes are hurt by sunlight, and his flesh shows the scars of sun-sensitivity. He stands tall and angular. He keeps his head bowed to the ground. Gently does the man smile; gently does he move; and gentle is the timbre of his voice. His accent is soft and African, requiring of his American listener a particular attention for understanding him.

Zephaniah Kometa asked the clerk for a newspaper, smiling, casting his half-blinded face down to the counter.

The clerk raised her own eyes and uttered the first half of the word "What." The clerk said, "Wha--" saw Zephaniah's face, snapped her mouth shut, and began rapidly to blink her eyelids.

Zephaniah repeated his request more clearly, nodding in order to send it to this woman with gently nudgings.

The clerk popped her mouth open and began to giggle.

She broke sight from the man before her. "I," she said. She frowned at her fingernails. "I, hee-hee, hee-hee."

"Nyews-pepah," Rev. Kometa said.

The clerk peered anxiously about the little lobby, seeking help. And there was I. Her faced suffused friendship and familiarity, and in a whisper shouted: "What did he say? What's he trying to say?"

But I had never met the man before.

The African reached, touched the back of her hand, and pointed to the magazine rack: the newspapers.

His touched snapped her still. His gesture triggered understanding. In a sudden haste to grab the paper, she swept her pen and registration papers to the floor. He bent to help her. He served her.

And I wondered who the man might be, so restrained, refined, patient, dignified, and kind.

And, at first glance, so odd: a black man white; a white man black.

The clerk—relieved when our car arrived—never would know. But I had a week with this remarkable minister. I came to know.

Presently Dr. Zephaniah Kometa teaches at a Seminary in Namibia. In those days he was the Pastor of a parish under South African rule, if indirectly. In those days South Africa's rule was hard, by apartheid distinguishing fiercely among Blacks and Mixed and Whites. Both the pastor and his people knew oppression in their flesh. They suffered arbitrary "detainments," imprisonments without formal charges; suffered impoverished opportunities and circumstances; suffered the severe restrictions of their freedoms, their travels; suffered the fears and the hatreds of a ruling white minority. They had few rights that they could count on, plan upon, build a future and hope and identities upon.

Rev. Kometa himself, as a leader, lived daily, consciously, with the knowledge that he could be murdered. He is younger than I am. In those days he was younger than I was—and I was forty-one.

After the lecturing, after chats at mealtimes and pipes in the evenings—in the night before we would descend the mountains together and part and return to our separate ministries—I sought him out. The wonderment that had begun for me in the lobby of a Seattle motel had in six days only grown the deeper. I knew what he was about to do. But I didn't know quite why. I wanted to know his motives, and something of his heart.

Therefore, I met in late in the evening, in the dark that made similar colors of us both. We sat outside on a high porch, he in a chair, I on a step. And the great starry sky was the ceiling above us.

"Zephaniah," I said.

"Walter," he responded. Well-tah.

It was, I thought, not unlike the conversations of the Old Testament which begin "Samuel," and continue, "Here am I."

I said, "You're going back, of course. It goes without saying, doesn't it?"

"Going ... back?"

"Yes. I mean to Namibia."

Zephaniah's eyes are wide open at night. If he ducks his head then, it is out of habit, not for any need of protection.

"Namibia," he said, looking directly at me; then he tossed his head up and laughed. "Well-tah," he said, "what would my wife say if I did not?"

I, of course, was thinking of the circumstances into which he would return, and I spoke the next words almost as if they were a confession: "You are," I said, "a brave man. A courageous man."

His laughter turned into a hoot. As if I'd told a right fine joke.

I cleared my throat.

Zephaniah bent and touched my shoulder.

"Oh, no," he said. "Oh, no, there is no great courage in me, I assure you, Well-tah. Listen: where we live, our houses are not so tightly closed as yours. Animals come creeping in at night, sometime for the warm, sometime for the crumbs. But if it is for the warm, then I hear them, you see. I hear them rustling under our bed. And then, Well-tah...."

The African paused, shuddering with laughter, patting my shoulder in clear indication that I was not the cause of it.

"And then I pretend with all my might to be asleep. Oh, yes, so deeeeeeply asleep. For you know, Well-tah, that soon my wife will wake up. And she will hear the slippery creature under our bed. And she will say, 'Zephaniah! Zephaniah, get up and kill that thing!' But me, oh, I am sleeping, sleeping, and can no one wake me up—because I am scared to death of little creatures at night. Nooo. No, my wife would have a big argument with you, Well-tah, about this assessment of her husband: courage."

"Then, Zephaniah," I asked of his laughter, I think, of the pure melody of his humor, "then do you go home with some fear? Or with none?"

He sat back in his chair, a presence above me.

"Fear," he said soberly. "I go to my home and my congregation always alert with fear, which is a good and necessary fear. But it is a much more dreary fear I carry within me quietly."

I commented on fear then, since I felt it likewise in my own inner-city ministry. But I drew comparisons and simply could not find words for the oppressions that caused his. My life was not in danger.

"But you go home," I said, as if no conversation had passed since my first comment and this.

Zephaniah suddenly raised his right hand high above the both of us, blotting out a thousand stars.

"For my friends," he said.

I was quiet. It was not unreasonable for me at that moment to envision the members of his congregation, his colleagues, his relatives, the "friends" for whom he put himself in harm's way, being a leader--and my sense of friendship was enriched thereby.

But I was wrong.

"My friends," said Zephaniah Kometa, "are in desperate need, are in the soul's need, and perhaps none but we, black and Christian, can save them."

"Your friends, Zephaniah," I said.

"Yes?"

"Your friends are ... white?"

"Yes. Of course. White."

"They ... your.... I'm sorry, but do you mean that these friends are your oppressors?"

"Who are themselves far more oppressed than I. Far more imprisoned and miserable."

Rev. Kometa spoke these brief declarative truths without drama. They were the facts of his existence. His ministry. And mine.

"Well-tah, they may be the ones to oppressed me and my people. But they are visible, you know. It is the invisible that oppresses them. It is sin. And who shall set them free from sin?"

"Zephaniah, can you tell me truly that you don't hate those that hurt you? Truly? You are scared of them, but you don't hate them?"

At that question—that appeal, really—my friend slipped from his chair on the porch and took a seat beside me on the step. He bowed his head, and now it was the cloud of his hair that caught starlight and the stars themselves in fiber like a crown.

"You see," he said, "they are not the enemy. They are threatened and wounded and killed by the enemy of everyone. This enemy is killing their souls. He can only take my body, not my soul, not my life. So they are under the worst oppression. I do not hate them. I pity them."

"Then who is the enemy?" I asked. Yes, I knew the answer to my own question; but I had never before met the minister who could utter the answer with the whole of his being, his body and his choices and his actions and his will and his faith—not just with his mouth alone.

"Who?" I asked.

"Evil," he answered. And he gave evil a name, for it had in Africa a personal presence, a power, and a violent purpose: "The enemy is the Devil."

In Africa. In America. Wherever souls might be divided between life and death, evil is not people! Evil is not our first and final kin, the children of Adam and Eve. Our deepest enemy never was, nor ever will be, those who kill the body, but after than have no more that they can do. "But I will warn you whom to fear," said Jesus to those he called friends: "Fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!"

The servant of God, therefore, is sent by God to serve whom?

Joseph served those that had sold him into slavery.

Jonah (in spite of himself, my colleague-ministers!) served the city of the "enemies" of his people, Nineveh of Assyria. In the name of God, he served those who would murder Israel; and by God his ministry was successful, for these people repented that they might be saved.

Hosea served her who had left his marriage bed to share her prostitute's bed with many instead of one.

Jeremiah served those who scorned him, despised him, imprisoned him in a muddy cistern.

The servant of God is sent, therefore, to serve whom?

Jesus Christ ministered unto all people.

In Jesus there is no division of the peoples. For didn't he supercede enmities by urging his disciples, salt and light, to replace the old command, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy," with his new command: "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven."

And if the Christ of God approached his most horrible act of ministry with fear, praying the Father to remove the cup from him, he nonetheless finished the act and saved the people.

For the enemy is the Devil, the Father of lies, that Evil which would bind the souls of us all and cast them into Hell.

God and the Devil make, between them, a unity of us all! And the true war is cosmic, after all, whether we serve in Africa or America or the city or the ghetto, in wealth or in poverty, in one or the other of the nation-states that have declared (a lesser) war on each other.

In the Reverend Zephaniah Kometa I met a model of the minister who serves the human population wherever there are divisions: a minister unto the nations, yes, though his most focused ministry is to the patch surrounding his house. For don't the nations meet there? Right there?

And right here?

And if any should say to me, "But the task is impossible! Enemies will never eat together," I will answer with the story Zephaniah told me, whence his very particular (and most common) method of service.

He said that one day he saw two white children wandering through his neighborhood, obviously hungry and lost and helpless. He did not know how they came to be in a territory altogether black, but he surely recognized their hunger. Spontaneously, he invited them into his house and into his kitchen for food.

Now, Zephaniah's wife was a strong-willed woman who harbored in her bosom a fiery anger against white people. She had many proofs of why the blacks should be angry. She was also the only cook in the Kometa household.

When her husband entered the kitchen with the two little white children, she was facing away from them, busy with a soup.

He said to her, "You must give these two small people something to eat."

Still without looking, she said, "Okay. Sit down, all of you," and she ladled soup into two bowls, and then three, and then (Zephaniah was glad to note, for it meant that she, too, would sit with them) four. Except for her anger, she was a woman of kindness.

When she turned holding two bowls, she saw that the children were white.

Zephaniah told me that he ducked but kept watching her face.

"Oh, Well-tah, it was then I felt fear, fear in the gravest category."

The woman's face snapped shut like an iron pot. With shaking motions she set the bowls down, one before Zephania, one before an empty chair, none before the children. She turned back to the soup and paused a while. Then (Zephaniah said it was for no other reason than civility) she took another bowl and ladled soup into it and turn and placed it at the chin of one white child, turned again and again did the same for the other.

She did not sit.

But already the children were spooning the soup into their mouths, fearlessly, sloppily. They were so hungry that they took no notice of the drama occurring above their heads. They wanted only to eat. They made much noise, slurping, breathing, sucking.

And as the children ate—by the very act of their eating, the simply human need being satisfied—Mrs. Kometa was softened. She could not watch these hungry children, whom she herself was feeding, and remain angry. The hunger made them citizens of her own country, for its name was Hunger, and she had lived there a very long time. Moreover, it was her hand and her soup which now was nourishing them, which made them, too, the children of her own motherhood.

Before they were done, Zephaniah saw his wife touch the corners of her eyes with her sleeve.

This is why the African theologian would stoop in the lobby of a Seattle motel to serve a baffled, belittling clerk.

"When someone serves some other one out of kindness alone," he said, "the first one cannot hate the second one for long. When a woman feeds the children of her enemy, she discovers in her heart that they are of her flesh too. She discovers that she has shared motherhood all her life long with the mothers of these children. And then how can one find the fires for hating still?"

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