

The Reluctant Mother: Amy Carmichael

We can't always identify life-changing moments as they occur. When a little Indian girl named Preena crawled into Amy Carmichael's lap and called her "Amma" (or "mother" in Tamil) for the first time, neither of them could have known that this simple act would change both their lives forever, and the lives of hundreds of others.

Amy Carmichael was born in Ireland in 1867, the oldest of seven children. She was a feisty child whose longing for excitement often got her into trouble. When Amy's nanny told her she would grow plum trees out of her head if she continued her habit of swallowing the plum stones, Amy promptly swallowed twelve, delighted by the idea of growing an orchard on her head. Later, Amy learned that the seeds from a certain tree in the family garden were poisonous. She convinced her brothers and sisters to join her in seeing how many they could eat before they all died. (Fortunately, her information was incorrect and the seeds were harmless.) On a tranquil family vacation to the forest, Amy hid behind a tree and growled like a bear, sending all her brothers and sisters running for the house in fear for their lives. When told how naughty she was, Amy thought, "If only you knew how much naughtier I could be, you wouldn't think I'm naughty at all."¹

Amy was converted at age 12 while at boarding school and her life changed dramatically. As a young woman, she ministered tirelessly to the poor women (called "shawlies") who worked in the textile mills of Belfast. During this time she heard Hudson Taylor of China Inland Mission describe the great need for missionaries. "In China," he said, "four thousand souls a day are dying without Christ." Amy's all-consuming desire to spread the Gospel, coupled with her love of excitement and strong personality, seemed a perfect fit for the mission life he described. Amy decided that she would never marry or have a family, but would instead serve Christ by spreading the Gospel in foreign lands.

After several delays and false starts, Amy landed on the shores of India in 1895. Soon she and her band of native women, called "The Starry Cluster," began teaching the gospel wherever they could gain an audience. On a trip to the village of Pannaivilai in 1901, Amy met Preena, a child of seven who had been sold by her mother to the Hindu temple to become a temple prostitute.

Amy met Preena during the girl's second attempt to escape the Hindu temple. The first time, she made it all the way home to her mother without capture. Her mother was afraid that the gods would punish her if she didn't return Preena, so she took the terrified, screaming child back to the temple women. The temple authorities branded Preena's hands with hot irons as punishment for running away. Still, when the child found another chance to escape, she seized it and ran

to a church in the village. Preena was found by a local woman named "Servant of Jesus" who took her to Amy. Preena immediately climbed into Amy's lap, and they both fell in love.

Amy could not return Preena to the temple; that was unthinkable. But she was torn. The Tamil had a saying—"Children tie the mother's feet." Amy could see how true this could be in her own situation. Might Jesus be asking her to give up teaching His Gospel as an itinerate missionary to settle down to the menial labor of caring for this child? Like many women today, Amy was forced to choose between her planned career and full-time motherhood. Amy prayed for clear direction.

Within three months, four more homeless children had found their way to Amy's bungalow. She had her answer. The one who had given up motherhood for the cause of Christ was now required to embrace it for that same cause. Her feet would be tied "for the sake of Him whose feet once were nailed."

With the help of contributions from home, Amy founded a mission in Dohnavur with an orphanage to house the unwanted and endangered children of India. She threw herself completely into her role as *Amma*, taking a personal interest not only in the physical, but also the spiritual well being of each child. Dozens of little girls were rescued from temple prostitution and hundreds of others from extreme poverty or neglect. By obeying God's call to the seemingly menial labor of motherhood, Amy Carmichael established an orphanage that is still active over 100 years later. Her example of sacrifice and obedience has inspired countless others, both in missionary service and in motherhood.

If by doing some work which the undiscerning consider "not spiritual work" I can best help others, and I inwardly rebel, thinking it is the spiritual for which I crave, when in truth it is the interesting and the exciting, then I know nothing of Calvary love.²

Amy Carmichael

*Always keep busy working for the Lord.
You know that everything you do for him is worthwhile.*

I Cor. 15:58 CEV

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¹ Elizabeth Elliot, *A Chance to Die* (Fleming H. Revell, 1987) pg. 23

² *Ibid*, pg. 183