

# Who Knows Ten?

Molly Cone

## The Reminder

In a certain kingdom long ago, the people followed a strange custom. When a king died, a royal bird was sent out. The bird flew around, and the person on whose head the bird came to rest was named king. That's the way the king was chosen in this kingdom.

One time a very curious thing happened.

In this kingdom, there was a slave who made the fine people of the court laugh, even though his face was sad. They thought he was so funny that they dressed him in a cap of chicken feathers and a belt made of lambs' hooves and gave him a little drum to beat.

One night the slave dreamed that a small voice whispered to him. He sat up and tried to remember what the voice had said. But all that came to his head was the soft sound – *seeeds*.

“Seeds? How strange,” he thought. “What could it mean?” All the next day he puzzled over the strange dream. He could not make any sense of it.

That evening, as he was putting on his hat of chicken feathers, he saw that a number of small seeds had stuck to his feet. Quickly he scooped them up and because he didn't know what to do with them, he put them into the crown of his hat. Then he ran upstairs to make the people laugh.

But the people of the court did not laugh at him that night. They did not feel like laughing, not even at the funny slave, for their king was dead.

The sad-faced slave crept around behind the king's empty chair and fell asleep. He slept sitting up, with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. And he didn't wake up until he heard a curious sound in the air.

Rubbing his eyes, he peered around. He saw a great bird flying through the castle halls.

He opened his eyes wide for he had never seen a bird like this before. It was so large that the flapping of its wings sent a breeze through the castle rooms.

The bird flew around the room once. It came so close it almost touched the slave. Hastily he pulled out of the way. Then, on hands and knees behind the king's empty chair, he looked out again.

The bird flew around the room a second time. The slave crawled out a bit to see it better.

The bird flew around the room a third time – and landed on the head of the slave.

“Ouch!” said he, trying to push it off. “Shoo! Get away from me!” But the bird sitting on his cap of chicken feathers had found the seeds. It sat there and pecked at them greedily.

A great cry arose from the people. “The king!” they shouted. “The king!”

Suddenly the slave felt many hands upon him. He was lifted high and placed on the king's throne.

“Long live the king!” the ladies and gentlemen of the court shouted, and they all bowed low before him.

“Me?” stuttered the slave. “But I am only a slave!”

They paid no attention to what he said. For the great bird was sitting calmly on his cap of feathers, like an eagle on its nest.

“O King!” said the minister. “You have been chosen by the royal bird. You will rule over our land for the rest of your life. But you must promise one thing.”

“What is that?” asked the astonished slave.

“You must never forget that you are king!”

The new king slowly nodded, and the people clapped. The trumpets blew, and everyone shouted.

The king who had been a slave sat up on his high throne, but his face was still sad.

“Build me a hut,” he said without a smile. “Build it right outside the palace door.”

Puzzled, the minister ordered a small house to be built just outside the great palace door.

The king directed the workmen to make it a simple hut. It was made of rough wood and had no windows. The door was a stout one, however, and on it the king himself placed a huge lock.

The people of the court walked back and forth, looking at the hut curiously. When it was ready, the new king entered it. He stayed only a few minutes. When he came out, he locked the door behind him.

Every year this new king issued new laws. One year he decreed that every slave should be set free after working six years. Another year he decreed that slaves should be paid for their work they did and that they could buy their freedom from their masters with the money they earned. One day the king quietly decreed that in this particular kingdom, no one had the right to own someone else. All who lived there were free; there were no more slaves. And the king’s face was no longer sad. More and more, the people saw him smile.

But so gradually did these changes come about that the people of his kingdom hardly noticed.

What they did notice was the king's custom of going into the little hut once every year.

One day the minister asked, "What are you guarding so closely in that little house?"

"Inside are my most treasured possessions," the king said. "See for yourself." He unlocked the door and stepped aside.

With great eagerness the minister went into the tiny hut. He came out again, shaking his head. "But I see only a feather cap, a belt of lambs' hooves, and a drum!"

"That's right," the king said, smiling. "I made a promise to you that I would never forget I was king. But at the same time, I made a promise to God that I would never forget I was once a slave."

And after carefully locking the door of the little hut, he went back into his palace.