

Mercy Embodied/Embodied Mercy as Justice, Wisdom and Holiness

-Elaine Wainwright-

The theme of the conference, “Fire cast on the earth—kindling” is an evocative one. Catherine draws language and imagery from the Gospel of Luke to capture the power of mercy as it is cast onto the earth like a fireball, and to turn our attention to the one who casts it. She juxtaposes this with the word ‘kindling’ which shifts the mood of the metaphor from power to the imperceptible catching alight, the initial bursting forth of a flame, the tending and nurturing that the fire might take hold. Imperceptibly indeed, she has nuanced the Lukan verse in which Jesus says: “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” [Luke 12:49], so that the Lukan text now echoes through Catherine’s text and through us and our texts as we gather to reflect on “being mercy into the twenty-first century”. It echoes, however, with the nuances Catherine gave it for her times and it has echoed and will echo through us in our times as we engage this theme, informed as we are by all that is our world as we have sought to describe and analyze it and all that we have focused into our articulations of the call to mercy into the twenty-first century.

Circles and Spirals of Storytelling

We are drawn into circles and spirals of storytellers and storytelling. We are being animated by, becoming aglow with passion¹ as we draw into the spiraling process of our meaning-making, the lives and commitments, the passion and the pain of women and men of mercy—in the barrios of Brazil; in the ‘informal settlements’ of Boksburg, South Africa; in the high-rise United Nations buildings of New York city; on the islands of Tonga, Samoa, New Zealand and Australia where silenced voices seek to be heard and justice to be done for the *tua*, for the first peoples, and for those who are diaspora in this region; among those living in poverty and dying of aids in Kibera, Nairobi, and across the African continent; beside those working with and on behalf of the planet; and with those educating for justice and change anywhere in our world. Mercy has been kindled, mercy is kindling, mercy seeks re-kindling as it is

¹ Among the meanings that *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* (J. M. Hughes, P. A. Mitchell and W. S. Ramson, eds; 2nd ed.; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 620, gives to the word ‘kindle’ are “arouse or inspire” and “become animated, glow with passion.”

cast anew on the earth in this new century with its poverties and its potentialities, with its powers and its perversities.

We have heard and we will continue to hear the voices of our sisters, the voices of our partners in mercy, the voices of all those with and among whom we live and work. It is this that calls forth a new storytelling as did Catherine's time. We carry all of this with us in our consciousness, as we have heard it articulated in our initial paragraphs describing how we hear the call to mercy, as we heard it particularized in the papers of Elizabeth Davis, Anne Itotia, Senolita Vakata, Ana Maria Pineda, and Elizabeth McMillan. We will do as Catherine did as we tell our sacred story anew, letting that story echo in our re-telling, letting traces of that story intersect in wonderfully creative ways to shape a new tapestry of texts, a newly woven story or stories.²

With all this consciousness, I want to dialogue in this paper with the gospel of Matthew,³ to explore *embodied mercy/mercy embodied* drawing into that exploration mercy's intimate connection with wisdom [as seen in Elizabeth Davis' paper and as is evident in the gospel of Matthew]⁴ with justice [as the gospel of Matthew connects them and as that connection echoes through Ps 84 and the prophetic literature as well

² One of the images that I wish to use not only to inform this paper but to inform our process of theologizing in a postmodern age, described as it has been by Elisabeth M. Davis, "How Can We Dare Wisdom and Mercy in the Mosaic of our Realities," (Paper prepared and distributed for the International Mercy Research Conference 9 – 13 November, 2007), 9-11, is that of the fractal or the Mandelbrot Set. From a foundational imprint, multiple spirals emerge going in different directions forming the most wonderful patterns as modern computers image a mathematical formula that seeks to explain aspects of our universe. In the same way, from the foundational imprint of the gospel, multiple ways of theologizing and living mercy will emerge – this may be one way of celebrating the "prophetic spirituality of life" [Davis, 10] rather than a neo-totalitarianism that would seek to make all the same. For further exploration of these fractal images see <http://www.math.utah.edu/~pa/math/mandelbrot/mandelbrot.html#applet> (Accessed 3.9.07) and for examples of the design see <http://images.google.co.nz/images?q=Fractals&svnum=10&um=1&hl=en&ie=UTF-8&start=20&sa=N> (Accessed 3.9.07).

³ I am very conscious of the extremely limited aspect of this paper in which I have had to choose to engage with the Gospel of Matthew in a very limited way and through that the biblical tradition in an even more limited way. Our theologizing could engage with and needs to engage with the manifold threads of mercy and justice that weave their way through our sacred story.

⁴ This is the connection made by Davis, "How Can We Dare Wisdom."

as through much of our theologizing as women of mercy over recent decades], and with holiness [a connection made recently by Joan Chittister in one of her lectures in Auckland and which can be drawn into the fractal imaging of embodied mercy as we know it and seek to live it].⁵

Encountering Embodied Mercy

The Jesus of any one of the gospels can be imaged in multiple ways. Each of the evangelists/storytellers sought to tell Jesus' story and their community's story as they intertwined. We now re-tell that story as our story, as the Jesus story, the Matthean story, and our story intertwine. As we dialogue with our tradition in and through the Matthean gospel story, we can encounter the Jesus of this story as mercy embodied or as embodied mercy.

One of the earliest metaphoric namings of Jesus is Emmanu-el or G*d with us.⁶ That G*d who can be imagined in many ways, is called *Rachamim*, the Womb-compassionate one in the Hebrew Bible [Ex 33:19, 34:6; Is 30:18; 49:13, 15; 54:10], the one who called a people out of Egypt [Matt 2:15, quoting Hos 11:1-4, a poem replete with female images of the divine].⁷ But such an early naming of G*d's

⁵ Joan Chittister used the phrase “keepers of mercy’s flame” which resonates with the imagery of our conference as she explored holiness in today’s world in a paper delivered recently in Auckland. See also Nico Koopman, “Confessing and Embodying the Holiness of the Church in the Context of Glocality. A Rage for Justice,” paper delivered to the ANZATS Conference, Canberra, 8 – 12 July, 2007, in which he used the phrase “a holy rage for justice” which he takes from the Danish theologian Kaj Munk.

⁶ One of the ways which Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has proposed to interrupt our familiarity with the naming of the divine and its accompanying male imaging is to write that name in this way: G*d (see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus—Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), n. 3, 191. I will use this nomenclature throughout this paper to invite us as women of mercy to be/come deeply aware of the power and pervasiveness of dominant male images in our consciousness, woven into our spirituality and theology and given expression in our language and symbol systems. I believe that unless we shift patterns of thought and language, we will not be able to change structures and systems of power on behalf of all those, especially women and children, whom such language marginalizes and renders invisible and hence of no account.

⁷ For one exploration of this imagery, see Elaine M. Wainwright, “The *Rachamim*/Womb compassion of Israel’s God: Shared,” paper given at the 2006 conference of the Australian Health and Welfare Chaplains Association, Brisbane,

rachamim as embodied in Jesus is in anticipation. Indeed, as a newly born baby, Jesus, with his parents, is under threat politically from a puppet king, Herod. Like so many children around our globe today, Jesus is displaced at birth. His parents must flee with him for their very lives. We are not told of the reception these refugees receive in Egypt. As readers, however, we fill in the gaps in the story, recognizing that the survival of this family and their capacity for choosing to return to their homeland as its political climate changes points to a possible favourable reception in Egypt. What this story does, therefore, is to situate embodied mercy in a context of political upheaval and its incumbent displacement of peoples.⁸ It is a context that calls out for the fire of *rachamim* to be cast on the earth and for the G*d who called “his [sic] son” out of Egypt [Matt 2:15 quoting Hos 11:1] to call all the displaced of our world out of their exile through those who today embody *rachamim*.⁹

A second aspect of the fire of *rahamim* cast on the earth and made visible in the birth of Jesus is embodiment and materiality.¹⁰ Jesus, while being of a spirit that is holy [1:18, 20], is of the body of Mary, his mother [Matt 2:11, 13, 14, 20, 21]. She, in her turn, stands in a line of women who give birth from their bodies—Tamar [1:3], Rahab and Ruth [1:5] and Bathsheba [1:6] and the many unnamed women—birth to sons as the story’s emphasis suggests but also birth to daughters. The embodiment of mercy turns attention to the material—the materiality of bodies but also the materiality of the universe. The story of embodied mercy is not only located in human persons. It is also

Australia, 9-13 July. This can be accessed at http://www.centacarebrisbane.net.au/pastoral_ministries/hospital.php. This paper demonstrates how *rachamim* intersects with many other ways of naming the G*d of womb-compassion, one of which is *chesed* or covenant fidelity.

⁸ Anne Itotia, “Africa—Urbanization and Proliferation of Slums: A Case Study of Kibera – Nairobi,” 5-7, 10-12, shows the complex history of colonization and displacement of peoples that characterizes not only Kenya but much of Africa. This theme of displacement of peoples is also at the heart of the Visioning Statement of Mercy International [<http://www.mercyworld.org/projects/index.asp>, accessed 31.8.07] and hence is a central call to us into the twenty-first century.

⁹ Many women of mercy today work with displaced peoples either in their diaspora context or as they return to their homeland through Mercy and Jesuit Refugee Services as well as with other organizations.

¹⁰ I want to draw our attention to the pervasiveness and multiplicity of materiality in our sacred story in order both to raise awareness of the other-than-human which we have so often overlooked in our focus on the human/divine encounter only and to encourage us to learn to read anew for embodiment and materiality so that we might develop an ecological consciousness necessary for saving our fragile planetary home.

located in place—the place where the child was [2:9], the star that guided the wise ones to this place [2:2, 7, 9, 10], a place which is then called *oikos* or house [2:11]. The wise ones then return to their own country or region [their *chōran*]. One cannot tell the story of embodied mercy, one cannot be embodied mercy, kindling the fire cast on the earth, apart from location, apart from the materiality of all that makes up that location. Mercy into the twenty-first century means that this materiality needs to be honoured and valued as is the human, protected from political and economic domination as the newly born Jesus is protected from the political machinations and destructive intentions of Herod.¹¹

And before leaving the opening stories of the *Rachamim* that is cast on the earth and is the with-us G*d, it is important for us to note that this embodied *rachamim* is located in family [*whanau*] and genealogy [*whakapapa*].¹² It is located in culture, the Jewish culture of first century Palestine, an occupied country whose people's religious and other cultural traditions were being shaped by the colonizer as well as being held to firmly by the colonized. Embodied mercy today is likewise located in cultures, cultures being colonized by globalization with its development of a global culture that consumes the local, the indigenous. Reading the Jesus story with the lens of embodiment, materiality, and the centrality of family, genealogy and culture is to read with the Jesus of history, with the Matthean community of the first century Roman empire and with the daughters and sons of Catherine kindling the fire of mercy in our day in all the varieties of their locations and cultures. It is to hear, to experience the

¹¹ Our storytelling also needs to take account of the “male children of Bethlehem”, the children for whom Rachel weeps, who are not saved as Jesus is saved [Matt 2:17-18]. Who are the ones that our storying and our living of Mercy leave to annihilation by the political oppressors [as the Matthean storying of embodied mercy does to the male children]? These are uncomfortable and challenging questions but ones which we must not avoid for to do so may lead us to avoid giving attention to who and what we leave to annihilation.

¹² I use here the two Maori words *whanau* and *whakapapa* because of their centrality in Maori culture and life and the awareness that this raises in New Zealand society [or at least segments of it] of the importance of family and genealogy and its connection to location and culture. For further exploration, see Tui Cadigan, “A Three-Way Relationship: God, Land, People. A Maori Woman Reflects,” in *He Whenua, He Wāhi/Land and Place: Spiritualities from Aotearoa New Zealand* (Helen Bergin & Susan Smith eds; Auckland: Accent Publications, 2004), 27-43.

winds that blow from our shared sacred story through our many realities and to know the shared call to mercy.¹³

Wisdom-shaped Embodied Mercy

One of the characteristics of today's world that impacts on all of our contexts is globalization.¹⁴ We may do well to examine it in dialogue with the pervasiveness and power of the Roman empire in the first century. Jesus proclaimed an alternative *basileia* [empire] to that of Rome, a *basileia* characterized by righteousness or right ordering, not the unjust *pax Romana*, a peace or ordering won by power and might rather than justice and love.¹⁵ Jesus proclaims that this new *basileia*, the *basileia of the heavens, the basileia of G*d*, is near at hand, is indeed embodied in his ministry of preaching/teaching and healing [Matt 4:17, 23-25 and 9:35 which frame Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching and healing]. It is this *basileia* that also frames the beatitudes [5:3-10], woven through as they are with challenges to do righteousness [*dikaio sunē* or right ordering] and mercy [*eleos*]. The wisdom Jesus teaches in the beatitudes and throughout the Sermon on the Mount is that of embodied mercy/justice or righteousness [5:6, 7, 10, 20; 6:1, 2, 3, 4, 33].¹⁶ The healing action that Jesus undertakes in proclaiming the *basileia* [Matt 8-9] is womb-compassion.¹⁷

¹³ I am drawing here on the imagery and language of the poem of Adrienne Rich with which Elizabeth Davis closes her paper. See Davis, "How Can We Dare Wisdom," 13.

¹⁴ Davis, "How Can We Dare Wisdom," 8-9.

¹⁵ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), reads Matthew's gospel in the context of the Roman Empire of the First Century CE. See also his *Matthew and the Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburgh: Trinity Press International, 2001) in which he explores that culture more fully and *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006). See also Mary Ann Beavis, *Jesus and Utopia: Looking for the Kingdom of God in the Roman World* (Minneapolis: Fortress 2006).

¹⁶ I have explored this more fully in "The Spirit of Compassion of Jesus Healer: Shared," the second of four papers given at the 2006 conference of the Australian Health and Welfare Chaplains Association, Brisbane, Australia, 9-13 July. This can be accessed at http://www.centacarebrisbane.net.au/pastoral_ministries/hospital.php.

¹⁷ Immediately following the repeated summary of Jesus' ministry in 9:35 [see the parallel and framing aspect of 4:23/9:35], the narrator says that when Jesus saw crowds as he went on his itinerant ministry journey, preaching, teaching and healing, that he had compassion on them – womb-compassion. The verb used is *splanchnizomai* which scholars suggest means moved in the depths of one's being, one's bowels, one's womb. For other uses of this same verb to describe Jesus' ministry of compassion, see Matt 14:14; 15:32; and 20:34.

To stand in the gospel tradition, to continue to tell the gospel story of the *basileia* of G*d/the *basileia* of the heavens ought to engage us subversively but perhaps the fact that both socially and ecclesially, we now belong predominantly to the empire has obscured our commitment to the subversive. We are among the “haves” rather than the “have-nots”, those possessing rather than distributing the world’s resources for the alleviation of poverty. To become embodied mercy/justice and righteousness, we may need to proclaim that the *globalization of G*d is near at hand*. What would that mean— that just as Jesus sought to imagine, proclaim and work for an alternative to the *basileia* of Rome, we need to imagine, proclaim and work for an alternative to the *globalization* of today’s Romes. This would not entail a denial of globalization but rather a seeking after ways in which we might critically analyze it, read or decipher the signs of our times with wisdom in order to determine what will not lead to the right ordering that is of G*d and those elements of the global networking which can be turned toward justice, mercy and fullness of life for all.¹⁸ Such a task is not one that we can do alone but one in which we must participate with others across Christian and all faith traditions. This would be to continue the telling of a gospel that was subversive. This would be to embody the mercy that comes from wisdom sought out in our day as Jesus sought, proclaimed and lived it in his day.

Embodied Mercy – seeking after Holiness

There are many stories, many aspects of mercy embodied or embodied mercy that we could explore in the gospel of Matthew with the many intertexts from the scriptures of the Matthean community that have been drawn into their storying of Jesus. I will, however, take up just two stories and explore them in a little more depth that they might contribute to our theologizing and open up ways in which different

¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes* called us to read the signs of our times in 1965 and the Commission of the Bishop’s Conferences of the European Community, *Global Governance: Our Responsibility to Make Globalisation an Opportunity for All* (2001. Available at http://www.comece.org/comece.taf?_function=euroworld&_sub=trade&id=4&language=en. Accessed 31.8.2007), 5-6, to which Elizabeth Davis drew our attention, makes a similar contemporary call in the face of globalization. The Commission lists the core values that are possible within globalization as respect for human dignity, responsibility, solidarity, subsidiarity, coherence, transparency and accountability.

communities of mercy might theologize about the embodying of mercy in many different locations. The first story is that of the Canaanite woman in Matt 15:21-28. It is a story that one can return to over and over again and it will yield up new insights. As we place this story in its literary context [15:1-28; 14:13-16:12], we find contestation over holiness: is it found in the “tradition” or is it seeking to hear what is of G*d [15:3, 6, 8-9]. Jesus, the wisdom teacher, challenges disciples: do you not understand that holiness is of the heart [15:17-20].

Following this exchange, the Matthean storyteller invites the listening community into a story in which Jesus is tested in relation to his embodying of mercy and holiness. This story is located on the border between Tyre/Sidon and Upper Galilee. It is a borderland story and it is not completely clear who is in whose territory as Jesus and the Canaanite woman meet: one has come out and one has gone to or into [Matt 15:21]. The story is set, therefore, for the possibility of something new emerging from such a context and such an encounter as Gloria Anzaldúa indicates:

At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somewhat healed so that we are on both shores at once, and at once see through the serpent and the eagle eyes.¹⁹

The woman represents in this story the female-headed household of the outsider or the other, the one who crosses cultural boundaries to seek healing for her daughter.²⁰ She is named in the language of religious outsider [Canaanite] but she is also ethnic outsider [of the region of Tyre and Sidon]. And her daughter/her household, she designates as demon-possessed. There are a number of ways in which the first-century Matthean community might have understood the designation ‘demon-possessed’.²¹ For our purposes, I want to explore just one of them, namely that the daughter bears in her body the dislocations associated with the social, economic and political conflict within the region where Tyre/Sidon and Upper Galilee met.²² She represents the

¹⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 78.

²⁰ See Itotia, “A Case Study,” 7.

²¹ See Elaine M. Wainwright, *Women Healing/Healing Women: The Genderization of Healing in Early Christianity* (London: Equinox, 2006), 125-127.

²² Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. L. M. Maloney; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 79, says that

women and children trafficked across borders, the people of Kibera, especially the children of the female-headed households, all those whose lives are marred profoundly by the social, economic and political situations in which they seek to survive. The breakdown of human relations is visited on the body of this young daughter and on the land itself, the land which becomes the border across which healing mercy is negotiated: “Have mercy on me,” the woman cries [Matt 15:22].

The shock for us in this story is that Jesus does not respond to the woman’s cry for mercy in this boundary encounter. In fact, the Matthean storyteller narrates that he ignores her. This rejection is followed by a similar rejection from the disciples of Jesus, those learning embodied mercy through the teaching, preaching and healing ministry in which they are engaged with Jesus, who propose to send her away.²³ And as part of the construction of a three-fold barrier to this woman’s cry for mercy receiving a favourable response, Jesus moves from the boundary encounter to the centrist religious position: I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel [15:24]. Jesus like the Pharisees of 15:1-9 and like the disciples [15:23] must grapple with a new situation that calls for a new challenge. He knows and articulates the theology of “chosenness” as Leticia Guardiola-Saénz calls it,²⁴ a theology which would have been considered both ‘word of God’ and ‘tradition’ [Matt 10:5; Is 53:6; Jer 50:6; Ezek 34 and Gen 18:19; Deut 7:6; 14:2; Is 41:8 by way of example] in

“[a]ggressive prejudices, supported by economic dependency and legitimated by religious traditions, strained the relationships between the more thoroughly Hellenized Tyrians and the Jewish minority population living either in Tyre or in its vicinity, partly in the city and partly in the countryside. The economically strong Tyrians probably often took bread out of the mouths of the Jewish rural population, when they used their superior financial means to buy up the grain supply in the countryside.”

²³ The Jerusalem Bible translation of this verb is “give her what she wants” but this is questionable given the use of the same verb, *apoluein*, at 14:15 when the disciples propose to Jesus that he send the hungry crowds away to buy food for themselves and 15:32 when Jesus does not want to send the crowds away hungry lest they collapse on the way. The two stories of multiplication of loaves/bread form a frame around the story of the Canaanite woman. It seems strange, therefore, that the verb would be used with a different meaning in this context, especially when there is no indication in the story itself that the disciples want Jesus to respond to her need. Rather their response is in line with Jesus’ initial ignoring of the woman’s request.

²⁴ Leticia Guardiola –Saénz, “Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21-28,” *Semeia* 78 (1997): 72, who, from her position of Mexican-American interpreter, challenges that “[i]f the ideology of chosenness has proven to be fatal and exploitative to the two-thirds of the world, then it is an ideology that needs to be challenged by all liberative readers.”

Jesus' context. Faced with this woman who is 'other', who is from across the border, whatever that border might be, Jesus is challenged to discern what it means to be the embodied *rachamim* of the G*d of Israel, the prophet of the "spirituality of life" in this situation which is new, this situation in which it is not "one's own" but the "other" who begs for mercy. This is the discernment required of one who seeks the right ordering, the justice and the holiness which is of G*d.

The boundary-walker, the woman who is "other" refuses to accept the construction of insider and outsider that Jesus began in v. 24 and continues in v. 26 in response to her second cry for help [v. 25]. Rather she tentatively proposes a new household that would enable herself and her daughter to share the same bread with Jesus and his disciples – even if partially, like the dogs who eat the crumbs! Her courageous and persistent engagement in this situation of challenge with and of Jesus enables Jesus to move back to the margins where he recognizes what she desires as being of G*d.²⁵ Healing/holiness is effected in this encounter as the cry of mercy is heard "where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God"²⁶ when the one who seeks to embody mercy can allow that G*d will be always new in the cry of the one most in need. Tradition, word of G*d, and holiness, justice and right will always need to be negotiated in the face of human need both within the congregation as we explore some of our centralist hermeneutics—whiteness, western-focus-ness, resource richness and other perspectives which we must name together—and more broadly as cultural and religious traditions of our world call us beyond what is known and safe. The G*d/*Rachamim* with us will be always new, asking new embodiments of mercy of us in the new situations we encounter. Displacement of peoples, trafficking in women

²⁵ The language of what she desires/wills in v. 28 echoes that of what G*d desires in the prayer of Jesus [Matt 6:10]. For a variety of approaches to this Matthean story, see my *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew* (BZNW 60; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 102-116, 217-247; "A Voice from the Margin: Reading Matthew 15:21-28 in an Australian Feminist Key," in *Reading from This Place: Volume 2—Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Fernando F Segovia & Mary Ann Tolbert, eds; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 132-153; *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 84-92; and *Women Healing/Healing Women*, 153-155; and 123-130 for the Markan parallel.

²⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist, 2000), 141, describes the prophetic aspect of contemporary religious life as wanting to be "where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God."

and children, the rape of the earth and the solidifying of traditions of holiness/spirituality into authoritarian demands for conformity—all these cry out for new embodiments of mercy.

Mercy Ever Embodied Anew

The final story I wish to explore is one which points to the “going away” of one embodiment of mercy in the person of Jesus but the remaining of that embodiment in those who come after. It is the story of the woman who pours out healing ointment over the head of Jesus. In exploring her story, I want also to demonstrate that in this story, the threefold aspects of the Matthean right-ordering or justice spiral: right-ordering of resources/Earth; right-ordering of community relationships; and right-ordering of the human/divine relationships.²⁷ But this is not all. In looking briefly at the different ways in which this tradition of the woman with the ointment spirals through the other gospels, I will suggest that notions of a metanarrative seem to be foreign to the origins of our Christian traditions. This in its turn might provide us with ways of understanding how we might hold “the integrity of multiple traditions while living in harmony.”²⁸

The ministry of Jesus prior to his arrest and crucifixion as told within the Matthean community closes with a great parable in which those who follow after Jesus are separated out into those who feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the imprisoned and those who do not [Matt 25:31-46].²⁹ And through the parable, Jesus proclaims that “as long as you did it to the least, you did it to me” [Matt 25:40]. Embodied mercy as Jesus did for the hungry, the stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned [Matt 11: 4-5 and passim] will now be done by those who belong to the Jesus’ movement and it will be as if they are doing it for Jesus, their teacher, healer and friend, the one whom they saw embodying compassion.

²⁷ Michael H. Crosby, *House of Disciples: Church, Economics, and Justice in Matthew* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), explores such intersections in much more detail than is possible here through the metaphor of *house* which he claims as being central to the Matthean gospel story. This could warrant further exploration in our theologizing mercy.

²⁸ Davis, “Can We Dare Wisdom,” 12.

²⁹ This parable is so often used to refer to the “corporal works of mercy”.

This parable is played out before the listeners/readers almost immediately when a woman with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment pours it over the head of Jesus while he is at a meal in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper [Matt 26:6-13]. There are many ways in which this story has been understood and I have no wish to contest these, but I want to suggest another reading which is important for our theologizing. The reader, at this strategic moment in the unfolding of the Jesus story is drawn into a web of relationships. Jesus is introduced as being in a particular space, a space into which a woman comes with an alabaster flask of costly ointment of pure nard that she pours over his head.

In Matthew's gospel, the house is a place of teaching and healing, the ministry of embodied mercy.³⁰ The naming of the house as that of Simon the leper focuses particular attention on healing and Bethany is also a place of refuge [Matt 21:17]. The materiality of village and house give a significant context to the action of the woman. It is in this space that attention is drawn both to the woman, to the alabaster jar of ointment of pure nard which she has, and to her action which brings her into relationship with Jesus. The naming of the *alabastron* turns our attention toward Earth and the stalagmitic deposits from which this translucent marble called *alabastros* was obtained. Earth has given of its resources to provide the woman with an appropriate container for the costly ointment or perfumed oil. Earth and the material of Earth are drawn into relationship with the human and invite the human person to be attentive to the gift.³¹

Into the *alabastron* has been placed very costly ointment [*myron*] of pure nard. *Myron* is a general word used to describe a wide range of perfumed ointments or oils both of which are prepared from plant substances grown in the Earth. The woman's breaking of the stem of the flask and pouring out of the ointment on the head of Jesus is an act

³⁰ For teaching see Matt 5:15; 7:24, 25, 26, 27; 10:12, 13, 14; 12:25, 29; 13:1, 36, 57; 17:25; 19:29; 24:17, 43 and healing 8:6, 14; 9:10, 23, 28.

³¹ Anne Primavesi, *Sacred Gaia: Holistic Theology and Earth System Science* (London: Routledge, 2000), 160, says that "[t]o see life as a gift event is to see that I am alive because I am continuously gifted with what I need to live. I am gifted because other organisms and species have not evaded or ignored the demands I make on them. Ultimately, this fact does not allow me to evade or ignore my dependence on the earth. Or to ignore my responsibility to return it, at the very least, the gift of gratitude."

of giving. She is the instrument of the giving, of the gifting, through her identification with the ointment but the ointment is the gift [it has been received by her as gift and will be given to Jesus as gift]. Jesus as recipient freely receives the gift that will strengthen him to give the ultimate gift, his life. As Anne Primavesi says:

*These interactive relationships between giver and receiver, between giver and gift and between gift and receiver link them openly, materially, sensually, with the link made tangible (usually) in some object passed by one to the other, chosen by one for the other and received by one from the other.*³²

Power is in the gift, in the *myron*, a power to bestow something that is lacking, to respond to the cry, the need. The context, Matt 26:1-5, points readers toward the lack: it is two days before the Passover and the chief priests and scribes are seeking to arrest Jesus and kill him. Jesus is facing into death with all the emotional turmoil that would entail. *Myron* poured over the head would put "good odours to the brain" Athenaeus says in the *Deipnosophistae* and this, he affirms, is "a highly important element of health" [XV.687 d]. He goes on to say that "the sensations of the brain are soothed by sweet odours and cured [or healed] besides" [XV.687 d]. The healing power of the *myron* of pure nard, this *pharmakon*, remedies the lack in Jesus so that he is able to face death: in pouring out the ointment, she has prepared my body for burying [26:12]. His need has been met by the merciful generosity of the woman and the power of the ointment. Had the gift been withheld as the indignant ones would have wished, the deficiency in Jesus would have been felt more acutely. And what she has done, her good work, is gospel and is to be proclaimed, to be enacted in the whole world [Matt 26:13]. It rightly orders the human-to-human, the human-to-other-than-human and the human-to-divine relationships. Mercy will be embodied in each new enactment, beyond the ministry of Jesus, beyond the death of Jesus, beyond the work of Catherine and all those who remember her story. Mercy will be ever embodied anew when such gifting takes place and where such right-ordering is enacted.

And this story that is told similarly in the Markan community [Mark 14:3-9], spirals out in other extraordinary ways in different communities' telling. In the Johannine

³² Primavesi, *Sacred Gaia*, 156.

community, Mary of Bethany anoints the feet of Jesus with the ointment/*myron* of pure nard and wipes them with her hair in an action which parallels that of Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples and wiping them with the towel with which he girded himself [Jn 12:1-8 and in particular Jn 12:3; and cf 13:5b]. This paper does not allow me the space to explore the characterization of Mary of Bethany in any detail but it can be shown that the sexually suggestive nature of her action indicates that it is the type of act that would normally be performed by a courtesan or prostitute. Since Mary is nowhere else presented as a courtesan, then her action would seem to be symbolic like that of Jesus, who is not a servant but who washes the feet of his disciples as would a servant. The action of both Mary and Jesus is that of crossing boundaries and entering a state of liminality; and it is the urgency of the time that calls forth such radical actions of boundary crossing. Mary's extreme act seems to be expressive of her extraordinary friendship in the exigency of the moment and its impending danger both for Jesus and those associated with him. Dangerous times call for courageous actions, symbolic actions, which might convey the depth of feeling, the depth of meaning of those times. This, it seems, is how the story of the alabaster jar of pure nard is woven into the tapestry of the Johannine narrative. And what an extraordinary story it provides for us as we explore the exigencies of embodied mercy into the twenty-first century and their continuing beyond our current embodiment.³³

To conclude this section, I note ever so briefly how the Lukan community re-shaped this story [Luke 7:36-50]. Reading against the grain of the Lukan characterization of women in that gospel, we encounter an anointing woman who embodies love [Luke 7:41-43]. She knows herself forgiven by G*d³⁴ and she gives expression to her

³³ For further exploration of this story from this perspective, see Elaine M. Wainwright, "Anointing/Washing Feet: John 12:1-8 and Its Intertexts within a Socio-Rhetorical Reading," in *"I Sowed Fruits into Hearts" (Odes Sol.17:13): Festschrift for Professor Michael Lattke* (Pauline Allen, Majella Franzmann and Rick Strelan, eds; Sydney: St Pauls Publications,2007), 203-220. See also Charles H. Cosgrove, "A Woman's Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, with Special Reference to the Story of the "Sinful Woman" in Luke 7:36-50," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124.4 (2005): 675-692, for the symbolism of unbound hair.

³⁴ Jesus' description of the woman's being forgiven in v. 47 is in the perfect passive tense – she has been forgiven – and because of this she shows great love to Jesus as the one who represents the G*d whom she knows has forgiven her. The same tense of the verb is used in v. 48 when Jesus says to her: your sins have been forgiven [he does not say that he forgives her sins]. This very significant insight for the interpretation of

recognition of embodied compassion in the person of Jesus. Within the three opening verses of the narrative [vv. 36-38], this woman acts in a highly erotic and excessive manner in relation to the body of Jesus,³⁵ taking the initiative, doing actions intended to give pleasure to Jesus, sexual pleasure, not just once but continuously. Intimately woven into and through her actions is the materiality of the human body, its substances and fluids, and the material of Earth, its substances and fluids. Jesus in no way interrupts her actions that catch him up in the interplay of bodies, Earth, fluids and substances. Rather he receives her ministrations. Her actions transgress both the physical space of the house of the Pharisee as well as the culturally gendered politics encoded in the text in and through the material that the text evokes.

Engaging intimately with the materiality of body and Earth, she has shown the hospitality that Simon failed to show to Jesus who is a prophet. Jesus demonstrates his prophetic insight not by stereotyping the woman but by recognizing in this woman of outrageous love expressed in and through powerfully erotic materiality, the great love of one who has been forgiven. She knows herself forgiven before she acts. She has not waited for the men in this context to tell her she was forgiven whatever her sins were that have been hidden from the readers of this text. She has a relationship with the Loving Forgiving One quite separate from that affirmed or denied by either the Pharisee, or the one whom the gospel names as Teacher. Having been drawn into the intimate and erotic experience of the forgiven woman, Jesus the prophet recognizes in her great act of love that Loving Forgiving One whom she acclaims through all that we have seen caught up in her actions. The permeating *myron* infuses and is infused by the radical incarnationality manifest in the woman, in Jesus and in the erotic intimacy of their encounter which is caught up into divinity. This is embodied love, holiness, wisdom and justice – it is radical and situational and invites ongoing storying in our different context of incarnationality.

Luke 7:36-50 is discussed in detail in Evelyn R. Thibaux, “‘Known to be a Sinner’: The Narrative Rhetoric of Luke 7:36-50,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23 (1993): 151-160. On the basis of the perfect passive of the verb, Thibaux skillfully demonstrates [p. 152] that “the woman’s sins have been forgiven before she performs the loving actions in vv. 37-38” and that the words of Jesus are simply “his offering her *assurance* (sure knowledge) that God has forgiven her sins and salvation is hers.”

³⁵ ‘Erotic’ is used here to connote love generally together with its most typical implication, sexual love.

Exploring these three iterations of an early Christian tradition of embodied mercy reminds us that stories and traditions of mercy will be multiple in our day. Like the early emerging communities of faith and love, we too are being invited to embody mercy and tell our stories of mercy in the many different modes and manners that characterize our contexts. And as we who have carried these stories in the vessel of religious life engage with and give way to others who will carry the stories in the vessels of different life choices, as did Jesus, embodied *Rachamim*, we will receive the ministrations of mercy of others as Jesus did as life is handed over. The storytelling will go on and it will go on in extraordinarily rich and new ways as did the telling of the story of Jesus, the *Rachamim* of G*d with us.

Conclusion

What I have been able to trace in this short paper is like the finger pointing toward the moon. It indicates what is possible, it opens up potential. It will, however, be the ongoing storytelling in our different contexts in dialogue with the multiplicity of our situational questions and issues and with our sacred traditions and texts that will enable us to embody *rachamim*/mercy as wisdom, justice, and holiness in today's world and into the twenty-first century.

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