



MERCY
GLOBAL
PRESENCE

Theological Imaginings: Presence in Community & Ministry

Elizabeth Davis rsm (Newfoundland)

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8) – these words from the prophet Micah gently set the context for this theological reflection on presence in community and ministry. Doing justice in ministry, loving kindness in community and walking humbly with God for both ministry and community are a simple and vibrant expression of right relationships among humans and with their God.

Presence in Community

Let us begin our reflection with community – the sacred communion of all creation. The first chapter of the first book of the Bible tells us, “God saw everything that God had made, and, indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). In Psalm 24 (v. 1), we read, “The Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” In a visionary statement in the mid-1990s, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians wrote, “Spirituality is the name we give to that which provides us with the strength to go on, for it is the assurance that God is in the struggle. Spirituality spells out our connectedness to God, to our human roots, to the rest of nature, to one another and to ourselves.” Today theologians take as a given that all community is rooted in this sense of the sacred communion of all creation. When we believe this to be so, our sense of community shifts dramatically.

Jesus, at the Last Supper as narrated in the Gospel of John, describes community at the core of being his followers, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). Catherine McAuley, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy, building on that foundation, assumes that relationship is at the heart of community, “My legacy to the Institute is charity: If you preserve the peace and union which have never yet been violated among us, you will feel, even in this world, a happiness that will surprise you and be to you a foretaste of the bliss prepared for every one of you in heaven.” She adds an intimate image of presence, “Our charity is to be cordial. Now cordial signifies something that renews, invigorates, and warms. Such should be the effect of our love for each other.”

Community and Ministry Meet

Implicit in these words on community is the reach into ministry. The Jesuit James Keegan puts it eloquently, “Mercy is the willingness to enter into the chaos of others.” Many of us would have studied the work of Martin Buber, the Austrian Jewish philosopher who died in 1965. His “Ich-Du” or “I-Thou” laid the foundation for the later work of many thinkers who directly linked community flowing into ministry, all rooted in presence. Buber said, “All real living is meeting. . . Healing emerges from the meeting that occurs between the two people as they become fully present to each other.” For Buber, presence describes a special way of being there or being with the other person which indicates a deep capacity to respond to the needs people have to be heard, understood, respected, and, when it is required, helped and supported. Buber is echoing a more ancient tradition inherited by Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs whose Sanskrit word for “mercy” *daaya* means “suffering in the suffering of all beings.”

For this connection between community and ministry to be real, inclusion is key. In the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, inclusion is valued although not always lived. We read in the first book of Samuel, “The LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearances, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). The suffering servant song from Isaiah (the only one which speaks of women) begins, “Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes” (Is 54:2). And in the parable of Matthew 25, we read, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt 25:35).

When a longer text from the Hebrew Scriptures is repeated in its entirety in the New Testament, we know that is a signal to pay attention. At his first homily recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter quotes from the prophet Joel, “God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on everyone. Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your young ones will see visions and your old ones will have dreams. Yes, even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in these days’” (Joel 2: 28—32, Acts 2: 17—18). Catherine McAuley also speaks to inclusion when she says, “Every place has its own particular ideas and feelings which must be yielded to when possible.”

The liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, whose book, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, influenced Pope Francis in his writing of *Laudato Si'*, speaks to the connection between community and ministry by using the wonderful image of the daughters and sons of the rainbow. In doing so, he is referring to the first covenant God makes (Gen 9:1-17), the covenant between God and all Earth (not just humans). God chooses the rainbow as a reminder of the covenant if God should ever forget that it had been made! Boff writes, “Human beings must feel that they are sons and daughters of the rainbow, those who translate this divine covenant with all the beings existing and living, with new relationships of kindness, compassion, cosmic solidarity, and deep reverence for the mystery that each one bears and reveals.” Today when we speak about integral ecology, we often quote from Boff’s book, “The cry of Earth and the cry of the Poor are one.”

If inclusion is essential to a healthy connection between community and ministry, boundary walking is one of the most effective ways to bring about the connection. Instead of seeing boundaries as self-protective walls and a means to define separateness, we need to see them as places of meeting where new relationships take form and exchange and growth happen. In his *Gaudete et exsultate*, Pope Francis wrote, “Unafraid of the fringes, Jesus himself became a fringe (cf. Phil 2:6-8; Jn 1:14). So if we dare to go to the fringes, we will find him there; indeed, he is already there. Jesus is already there, in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded flesh, in their troubles and in their profound desolation. He is already there.”

The theologian Anthony Gittins, CSSp, tells us, “Religious are especially and urgently called to the margins to encounter the people who struggle to subsist there. But we are friends of God and prophets only if we have a wrenching hunger and raging thirst for God’s justice, and for putting our lives on the line, as Jesus did. This is something we all do differently but each of us must urgently do.” The German priest, Sieger Köder, has painted the Samaritan Woman gazing into the well, seeing her own image and that of Jesus, a poignant image of two boundary-walkers!

Presence in Ministry

There is an insightful hymn by Matthew West entitled *Do Something* which contains the following verse:

I woke up this morning, Saw a world full of trouble now
Thought, how'd we ever get so far down, How's it ever gonna turn around
So I turned my eyes to Heaven. I thought, "God, why don't You do something?"
Well, I just couldn't bear the thought of People living in poverty, Children sold into slavery
The thought disgusted me. So, I shook my fist at Heaven
Said, "God, why don't You do something?"
God said, "I did, I created you"

Three women theologians describe ministry in a way that connects it intimately with community and presence. The words of Sandra Schneiders, ihm are frequently quoted, "We must be where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God." Her description is echoed by another woman religious, this time a Daughter of Wisdom from France, Inès Maria dell' Eucaristia fdl, who wrote, "In this troubled world, we wish to express God's love for wounded humanity and always we must answer the question: how can we dare Wisdom and Mercy in the mosaic of our realities?" The theologian, Wendy Farley, adds, "Mercy is a mode of relationship and a power that is wounded by the suffering of others and propelled to action in their behalf now."

When Jesus began his ministry, it was rooted in presence and in relationship. His parable of the Good Samaritan carries within it five moments in ministry and mercy presence: of the three who pass the wounded man, only one sees contemplatively; the Samaritan's heart is moved with compassion; he cares for the man, binding up his wounds ("mercying"); he creates a circle of mercy to help the man (the circle made up of the wine and oil from Earth, the road, the donkey and the innkeeper); and Jesus creates the culture of mercy when he advises the man to "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:25-37).

In Jesus' parable in Matthew's Gospel, the way of ministry is described in detail, "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt 25:34-36). Pope Francis adds another, "I was Earth, broken and abused, and you cared for me." The king not only describes the areas of need but makes clear that each one of us is vulnerable. In crafting the *Corporal Works of Mercy* in the Roman Catholic tradition, we have missed that nuance and framed them instead almost as a condescending outreach not in the spirit of community but as reaching out to the other. There is a powerful image of these words of Matthew in the dining room of The Gathering Place in St. John's NL, a centre of ministry for homeless people and precariously housed people. For each action, you cannot tell if the person is receiving or giving.

The connections between ministry, community and presence are threaded through Catherine McAuley's letters and other writings. She wrote about five postulants who were joining the community, "Consecrate themselves to the service of the poor for Christ's sake . . . this is some of the fire He cast on the earth – kindling." She wanted the ministry relationship to be loving and compassionate as she did community relationships: "You must be cheerful and happy, animating all around you," and "There are three things the poor prize more highly than gold, tho' they cost the donor nothing; among these are the kind word, the gentle, compassionate look and the patient hearing of their sorrows."

One modern image deepens our sense of connection between community, ministry and presence. It is a sculpture by Timothy Schmalz, entitled *The Homeless Christ*. Copies of it are placed outdoors in public places where many people walk past. Often people sit on the bench, not realizing it is a sculpture until they see the feet. Many passersby glare at the statue, believing it to be a homeless person.

This sculpture is a powerful conclusion to our reflection. Its very presence evokes response. These responses speak loudly of the strength and the weakness of community among us. They speak loudly to our understanding of ministry. They become a measure of the ways in which we relate to one another, the ways in which we are present to one another, the ways in which we live out the invitation of our God, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8).