

In the Heart of Winter, the Bells of Faith Ring True

Reflection by Michael Ramos, Executive Director, Church Council of Greater Seattle

I very much enjoy singing the popular ecumenical hymn, “In Christ, There is No East Nor West.” Indeed, in Christ, there is no North or South, either, although we of the Euro-North American mindset may sometimes miss that. The consequences of two-dimensional “Christendom” are colonialism, racism, exploitation, exclusion. We may “see” quite well, perhaps because we are well-fed and well-educated. But, are we well-tuned to **hear**? To hear the cries of Jamaicans, Haitians, Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean peoples? To hear the cry of those suffering from modern forms of slavery and new incarnations of Jim Crow? To hear the cry of those who do not “win” the economic ladder contest, who experience homelessness, who experience illness, confront addiction, who struggle from the breakdown of family?

The theologian Jon Sobrino points to a blindness that exists in modern society toward the cries of people on the margins, who experience poverty, who are victims of economic forces and their engineers rooted in accumulation and greed. He goes further. It is hypocritical to express sympathy from a safe distance while allowing systems of domination and power to cause more suffering and death. Where is God?! The people lament.

A product of Puerto Rican and Spanish bloodlines, I have both conqueror and conquered within me. I straddled both into adulthood, privileged by my parents’ sacrifice, not understanding the culture of my island relatives navigating the South Bronx of the 1970s. In honesty, Salvadorans and Guatemalans, Mexicans and South Americans, clear across the country, way over on the West Coast, took me in and called me by my true name. Them was me, after all.

The same impulses that lead elected officials to lambast Haitians and Salvadorans, Somalis and Sudanese, Central America and Africa alike, for trying to survive, do not leave the Christian communion free from complicity. Many who profess faith appreciate the value of religious liberty for those “just like us” and yet pause at extending that spirit of liberation to justice for an “other” who upholds family values rather than a proverbial or physical wall. Wonder why Jamaica, which had so much to sustain itself, was saddled with so much debt to international lending institutions? Ever think about right before Hurricane Katrina, how some people – of color more often than not – were not visited to evacuate and left stranded? And how long it took to get help? And how some parts of New Orleans are still being rebuilt today? Or, considering Puerto Rico, how more than 40% of the “commonwealth” of the United States is still without power more than four months after the terrible storms?

God does not divide human beings into the worthy and the unworthy. Homeless, jobless, seeker of Temporary Protected Status, undocumented refugee all are worthy, dignified, in divine eyes. God hears the cry of God’s people and acts decisively to bind up the brokenhearted and free the captives....and to announce a year of God’s favor. This is good news for the faithful.

In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we may announce once again that the God of Christ abounds in steadfast love. In such a God rests our security. To know the Jesus on whose cross and resurrection stands our church is to follow him. He is proactively seeking sanctuary in us. And principalities though there may be, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The dominant culture is troubled by such conviction and does what it can to banalize and trivialize, to coopt and distort. And so the only way to not be complicit in violence and oppression is to lament,

repent, discern and act from our core, as children of God called to repair the world, accountable to the One who sent us.

While in the West, it is appropriate to ask how in our secularized world so many do not practice religion or even believe in God, perhaps it is more important from a Southern hemispheric perspective to inquire, in what God do you believe? If idolatry is the greatest sin in the Bible, then what God has a claim on us? Is it the God who says welcome the stranger, for you too were once strangers in the land of Egypt? Is it the God of the widow, the alien and the orphan? Is it the God, whose Son bore the cross in love? God's invitation in so many ways is countercultural. The gospel leads us to the margins and periphery where Jesus himself was so often found.

A man was arrested this week after years of placing food and water in the barren desert of Arizona, where migrating peoples endure brutal conditions in order to cross to safety and new life. He was charged with a serious criminal offense. In John's Gospel, Jesus teaches his followers that God's ways mean washing the feet of one another. Then there's one more thing: go with him to the cross in Jerusalem. It was said that this "hard message" was too much for some of the disciples and they left.

Perhaps we are entering a season where our deliberate walk to encounter the crosses in our lives, accompanied by a God who does not abandon us, may lead us to new relationships with people whose daily lives are a form of cross-bearing. And perhaps together, opportunities will be presented, in God's gracious mercy, to begin to take down and dismantle crosses on which people suffer, one at a time. On such paths, the ecumenical spirit surely lives.

The great writer and theologian Dorothee Soelle, helps us to orient our discernment in light of the signs of the times.

*It's not you who should solve my problems, God,
but I yours, God of the asylum-seekers.
It's not you who should feed the hungry,
but I who should protect your children
from the terror of the banks and armies.
It's not you who should make room for the refugees,
but I who should receive you,
hardly hidden God of the desolate.
You dreamed me, God,
practicing walking upright
and learning to kneel down
more beautiful than I am now,
happier than I dare to be
freer than our country allows.
Don't stop dreaming me, God.*

--Dorothee Soelle, quoted in Susanna Snyder, "Looking through the Bars: Immigration Detention and the Ethics of Mysticism." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 35, 1 (2015): 167-187.

Ring to the North and South, East and West, the bells of winter, "Christ in ten thousand places," toll faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.