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The grace of living on the margins

Jamie Manson | Nov. 20, 2008

For more than 15 years now, I?ve felt starved by the Roman Catholic authorities. But lately I wonder if they haven?t done me a favor.

Since the age of 14, I have felt called to the priesthood. The only real opportunity I?ve been given to discern this call was through my studies for my master of divinity degree (at a Protestant divinity school, of course).

Perhaps it was the insurmountable heights of the ivory tower?s walls or the unshakable hope of feminist theology that clouded my judgment, but it wasn?t until graduation that I realized that an openly lesbian, unapologetically liberal Catholic woman with a M.Div. had somewhat limited career possibilities.

It would take years to find a Catholic community that would hire me as their pastoral associate. When the chance finally arrived, I was welcomed to the staff of a Jesuit parish in New York City noted for its ministry to the poor and the gay and lesbian communities.

The congregation had an interesting phenomenon that they referred to as ?upstairs church? and ?downstairs church.? Upstairs church was the sanctuary itself, where Mass, confessions, weddings and baptisms took place. Directly below the church was an auditorium where, each Sunday afternoon, more than 800 men and women received a hot meal, clothing, toiletries and a variety of other services.

In upstairs church, my body always seemed to get in the way. Though I had received an education equal or superior to most current Catholic seminarians, I could not preach the sermon or consecrate the Eucharist because of my female body.

Though I held the ordination degree and all of the appropriate ministerial experience, I could not baptize the baby or marry the couple because of my God-given gender. Though I did my very best to serve the community, I was never held in the same esteem as my priest colleagues because of my unordained and unordainable body.

In downstairs church, my gender and sexual orientation never seemed to create barriers. The poor reached out to me, whether on instinct or impulse, and asked me to pray for them, with them and over them. Their longings were basic and bodily: to be touched and listened to and looked at with love.

They didn?t know my previous education, my background, my theology or politics, and none of this seemed to matter anyway. They only saw presence -- my presence. And if I wasn?t especially present on a given Sunday, they saw that, too, and they let me know it!

These moments had a raw authenticity that always seemed elusive in upstairs church. I?ve been present at countless consecrations of the Eucharist, but most of those rituals pale in comparison to the presence of Christ I seen in the despairing eyes of a homeless man when I put him in a car headed for a long-overdue detox, or in the grateful gasp of a poor couple when I give them $15 to obtain a copy of their marriage record that will allow them to stay in a shelter together.

I was feeding people, and I, too, was being fed. This really is all that Jesus asks of us: that with our bodies we become bread for one another. Our minds do such harm to the Eucharist. We convolute it, politicize it, gender it. And with each act, I?ve come to see, we starve one another and ourselves.

Working in a Catholic setting, I often felt at best underutilized and limited, and at worst oppressed and useless. And yet, I cannot help but see what a gift it has been to be forced to live on the margins of the institutional church. It?s a paradox, I know, but I?ve met God in more paradoxes than I have houses of worship.

Being excluded from the church?s center has given me, as John?s prologue says, ?grace in place of grace.? It compelled me to discover the face of God in places I might never have ventured into. If I had not been rejected by the church, I may have never have had the chance to experience God?s real presence on the edge of our society.

Living on the outside pushed me to be creative in seeking the sacred, and kept me wary of the power trips, elitism and self-aggrandizement that I?ve encountered in so many ordained people. Though being excluded will always break my heart, the experience allowed God to break through to me in shattered, lonely spaces.

I moved on from that Catholic parish, and now serve as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. My primary role lies in directing our homeless outreach program which, each day, assists more than 50 homeless individuals with supportive counseling, food pantry items, clothing, toiletries, and the use of phones and computers.

I?m still incorrigibly Catholic in my passionate insistence about the sacramental nature of every encounter we have with our poor and homeless guests. But it is a relief to do the work without having to feel afraid or less-than-valid because of the body God has given me.

I do get a rush of sorrow now and then when I remember that I cannot practice ministry in the church that raised me, within the theological tradition that formed me and amid the social justice doctrines that ground my convictions. But brokenness is the heart of the Gospel story. And living on the margins helps me continue to identify with the margins I serve.

There is no perfect church, no perfect ministry and no perfect community. Instead, it is in the midst of radical imperfection that true Eucharist seems most likely to emerge -- in those downstairs churches where people are genuinely being fed. The church may continue to give much to some, and starve many. But in that hunger there are endless possibilities for us to be bread for one another.

(Jamie Manson received her master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology, personal commitments and sexual ethics with Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. She is the former editor in chief of the Yale magazine Reflections, and currently serves as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, working primarily with New York City?s homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the Women?s Ordination Conference.)

Editor's Note: Correction

Because of an editing error, the religious order of Sr. Margaret Farley was misidentified when this column was first posted. Sr. Farley is a Sister of Mercy. We regret the error.

Dennis Coday
NCRonline editor

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