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“...and he was known in the breaking of the bread.”

by

Michele Volz

A Pastoral Synthesis Project presented to the
Faculty of the Department of
Theological Studies
Loyola Marymount University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Pastoral Theological Studies
May 2013

Component I-Pastoral Initiative

I propose to develop practically, spiritually and theologically, ways in which people, young and old, can prepare themselves to serve at Isaiah House, a Catholic Worker Home, in Santa Ana, California. It will be, however, useful I hope, to others who might like to know how they can respond as Christians to those who find themselves homeless. The inspiration comes from Leia Smith, who directs the Home, and insights I've gained over a year of weekly visits to the women there.

WHO and HOW:

The project will involve creating a means of reflection on hospitality, or serving food to strangers, or those who are not, as yet, friends. It will be designed as a mini-retreat/reflection of several hours, that can be given to a group planning on visiting: church groups, service organizations, high school students in need of service projects. There will be a shorter version more appropriate for younger ones: Scouts, junior high students, etc. I hope it to be reference for a video the Workers would like to make, to be distributed on Youtube, for those who plan to serve at the House, or those unable to come, but interested in what they are about. I also plan to reduce the main components to a one-page handout, which should serve as a brief reminder for thoughtful consideration.

It is fairly simple to serve at Isaiah House. One simply shows up sometime before 5:30 p.m. when the meal is to be served to the 35-60 women who spend the night there. At the Isaiah House, groups come in almost every afternoon to prepare the evening meal. Generally, a group will come monthly, and assume responsibility for the third Thursday of the month, for example.

Meal preparations begin a few hours earlier, and might involve creatively using the donations available to make a healthy, tasty dinner. Or dishes might simply have to be heated in the large ovens, bread buttered, and salad chopped right before dinnertime. Wednesdays and Fridays are a little more involved as meals prepared those days are also to be transported to downtown Santa Ana, to feed an additional hundred-plus homeless who gather there nightly. So why prepare? Why not just show up?

WHY:

I have observed that there are different manners of serving food to strangers, some more Christian than others. Some pray before serving, either with the women or not. Several weeks ago, a well-meaning gentleman began the prayer in their backyard, “welcoming” them, which was awkward, as it seems to be their space, more than his. Some food preparers socialize with the residents there before meals are served, chatting with those they’re familiar with, and eating with them. Others do not. Some food-servers have the women come up to the high pass-through counter to receive their plates of food through the window area, while others invite the ladies to come directly through the large kitchen to receive their meal, an experience allowing for much more interaction.

There are different ways of practicing hospitality, which can be more than just offering food. Just as Jesus was “made known in the breaking of the bread,”¹ it is in sharing food that we might be reminded we are all creatures of the One Creator, dependent upon one another. God asks this of us: “You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: only to do justice and to love goodness, and to

¹ Luke 24:35 (New American Bible).

walk humbly with your God.”² Done well, preparing and serving food to those in need, brings humility to the soul, and justice to a world in desperate need. “Justice grows when we practice hospitality to strangers— people who do not share our assumptions about life, people of different political persuasions, people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, people with different gender and sexual orientations, people from different faith traditions or religions.”³

WHAT:

The reflection will cover the following:

- (A) The spiritual in food and meals
- (B) Hospitality-giving in Christian tradition
- (C) Homelessness
- (D) Expectations
- (E) Preparations and follow-up

(A) The Spiritual in Food and Meals

Reflection: When I asked the question of a link between food and the spiritual at Isaiah House, one woman, Lola, lit up immediately, and shared memories of herself as a young girl, learning to make cheese strudel with her grandmother in the kitchen. “Of course,” another said, “it’s all over the Bible, right?” And it is. The women there are mostly Protestant and know their Bible much more than I.

² Mic. 6:8 (NAB).

³ Richard M. Gula, *The Way of Goodness and Holiness* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 118.

Our Biblical heritage begins with our parents sharing fruit in the Garden. Abraham and Sarah provided their three strangers with bread, meat, and cheese, before the law, in accordance with the spirit of hospitality.⁴ Precepts in Leviticus respecting strangers and the poor⁵, spell out its necessity for the Jewish people. Jesus, born in a “manger”, an eating trough, spent so much time eating and drinking with his disciples that he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard.⁶ He chose to spend his last night here on earth having dinner with his friends. When he reappeared to the disciples for the first time in Jerusalem, it was in the middle of a meal, which he chose not to interrupt, but joined in, asking them, “Have you anything here to eat?”⁷ Weekly, as children of faith, we come together to consume the Eucharist, bread that has miraculously been changed into the Body of Christ.

It was not accidental that so many sacred stories revolve around food. Food is mentioned more than 100 times in Luke and Acts. From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus spent time with country peasants, scribes and Pharisees, fishermen, rich men, and sinful women, people fairly far removed from those his parents probably brought him up with. He shared meals and himself with them.

Community meals and sacrifices were an important part of Old Testament worship, but the daily meals were simple carbohydrate-rich ones: barley loaves, the manna God provides in the desert, the small cake the widow bakes for Elijah. Food is not come by easily; water drawn from a well, fires started and maintained to bake loaves,

⁴ Gen. 18.

⁵ Lev. 19:33-34 and 23:14.

⁶ Luke 7:33-34.

⁷ Luke 24:41 (NAB).

animals slaughtered, prepared and roasted. But the work was done for others, and especially strangers, to provide hospitality and welcome.

Questions to ponder and share answers with each other:

How has food you've been served brought you joy to your soul?

When have you found community over a meal?

How have drinks or food you've prepared, made a difference in another's life?

(B) Hospitality-Giving in Christian Tradition

Reflection: Every faith tradition has its version of the Golden Rule, from the Islamic, "Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself,"⁸ to Janism, "One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated."⁹ The prayer that all Christian faiths share, the one Jesus taught us in Matthew and Luke, for our daily sustenance, tells us to ask God for both our spiritual and bodily needs. It is not a prayer for individuals, "Give us this day our daily bread."¹⁰ We plead for not only ourselves, but for our community.

And who is our community? Is it the people of our parish with whom we share coffee and donuts after mass? Those we play or watch sports with? The ones we know a little better because we see them more frequently in faith-sharing groups, Knights of Columbus meetings, or as we wait for our children in after-school programs? Is it those who have our same interests, in Just Faith issues, book groups, or Bible study classes?

⁸ The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith.

⁹ Mahavira, Sutraritanga 1.11.33.

¹⁰ Matt. 6:11 (New Revised Standard Version).

Yes and no. There is joy and comfort in the familiar, but the most generous open their arms to all.

An event of importance is Jesus sitting at table with Levi and his tax collector friends,

Jesus shared a meal with untrustworthy and despised people in a home that was paid for through the means of unjust oppressions and fraud. Jesus broke bread with these people. Jesus was “company” to them and they to Jesus...Jesus shared who he was with them, and they shared who they were with him. Jesus spent time with them. Jesus spent himself with them.¹¹

He did so in the intimacy of their homes. He did not keep a distance, emotionally or physically. When Simon’s mother-in-law was sick in bed, he went to her, took her hand and helped her up.¹² Holding her hand, comforting her with his presence, he shows us how to respond to those in need.

The early Christians followed his example of being present to one another, and they did so joyfully, “They worshipped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity.”¹³

Questions to ponder and share answers with each other:

Who are the people you’re comfortable being with? Who are you not, and why?

How much physical contact are you comfortable with? Is it that way for others?

When has someone’s physical presence been healing for you?

Would people call you joyful?

¹¹ Robert Fabing S.J., *Real Food: A Spirituality of the Eucharist* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 32-33.

¹² Mark 1:31.

¹³ Acts 2:46 (New Living Translation).

(C) Homelessness

A few months ago at Isaiah House, a woman wandered into the kitchen where the servers were preparing chicken enchiladas and salad with dried cranberries and almonds. She was looking for the director, to hand over a fairly large check. When asked if she would like some salad, she announced indignantly: “I am NOT homeless.” “You don’t have to be homeless to enjoy salad,” the chief cook replied, without rancor.

In Jewish law, compassion to strangers is enforced by the precepts of Leviticus: “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”¹⁴ Being homeless is part of our Biblical heritage. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, had to leave the garden they knew. God’s people wandered in the desert for years, trying to find the land promised to them.

Augustine, whose painfully honest spiritual autobiography reveals his struggles to find Wisdom, which he eventually comes to name “God”, writes eloquently of his interior search. He comes to understand that his God, though always present, his “helmsman when I was adrift,”¹⁵ will not on earth be fully revealed to him. His/our ultimate home is not of this world. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹⁶

Several of the women at Isaiah House have confided that they are now in a much better place than they have ever been. I, mother of five, grandmother of two, had a hard time comprehending this. How could life away from your family be life-giving? Some have found, without possessions (that I could not live without: cars, closets, a place to

¹⁴ Lev. 19:34 (NAB).

¹⁵ St. Augustine, *Confessions* (New York, NY: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1961), 118.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

call my own) a personal home-coming that does not involve things, but interior peace. Some might be more “at-home”, interiorly, than we who are physically so.

While it might be easy to identify those who are homeless as wounded, our common humanity must remind us that we are all wounded creatures, all imperfect and in need of healing.

Questions to ponder and share answers with each other:

Where do you feel truly at home?

Why are people homeless?

Why are you not? Or are you in some way?

Do you notice anything odd about the term “feeding the homeless” (who/what else do we “feed”)?

(D) Expectations

Reflections: Many of the women at Isaiah House, are “out” most of the day, working or looking for work, in libraries reading or using computers, or just “out”. They return in the afternoon, to rest, wait their turn for showers, and look forward to dinner at 5:30. Some need quiet or find solace in a cigarette or book and others enjoy socializing with cards or conversation. Like you or I, they might be receptive to talking, or just want some peace.

Many deal with issues of shame. “Shame is about exposure...and our immediate response is to cover ourselves, even to hide.”¹⁷ Some wear baggy T-shirts, concealing

¹⁷ Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Transforming Our Painful Emotions: Spiritual Resources in Anger, Shame, Grief, Fear and Loneliness*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 84.

their shapes. Some are hesitant to make eye contact. “Shame...limits our freedom to participate in a dynamic which allows a community...to function in a manner that is healthy and effective.”¹⁸ Isaiah House is a place of transition, which is never easy, a liminal space, and must be approached with compassion.

They, like you or I, are sensitive about how they are perceived. Sue made a point of not mentioning to a group of Brownies who were visiting, that she was a mother. She said it was because she did not want to scare them; she was concerned they’d think that their own mothers might someday be in a shelter.

There might be some awkwardness at first, on both sides. But putting ourselves, deliberately, in a new situation, might be the first step towards softening our stony hearts and replacing them with more compassionate ones.¹⁹ Being open to conversion experiences may not come naturally or comfortably to those of us who are wary of new situations. But exposing our lives, and hopefully, therefore, our hearts, to others who differ from us, may, with time, introduce us to the Savior who resides in each of us,

Lives may change through a program, an insight, a conversation, a sermon, or any number of other momentary encounters inside or outside of Christian community. But lives are not transformed in this rapid or incidental way. Living the Christian life well takes time and practice. It asks the person undertaking this extraordinary life to aim at embodying particular habits and practices that will delight God, feed the joy of others, and grow personal integrity.²⁰

Questions to ponder and share answers with each other:

¹⁸ James M. Bowler, “Shame: A Primary Root of Resistance to Movement in Direction” *Presence: The Journal of Spiritual Directors International*. September 1997. 3 (3): 30.

¹⁹ Ezek. 36:26.

²⁰ Peter W. Marty, “Shaping Communities” in *Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 318.

How comfortable am I with new situations?

What might be the benefits of risking awkwardness? When has a previously awkward situation turned out well?

How perceptive am I to others' needs? What might I be blinded to?

(E) Preparations

Being hospitable to the homeless might expose us to more than we expect. But we are called to be in communion with others. And most likely, there will be surprises and blessings to be had. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."²¹

Jesus had some advice for his disciples heading out on a mission. He "instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick—no food, no sack, no money in their belts. They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic."²²

Questions to ponder and share answers with each other:

What would the above instruction mean for me, physically and spiritually? What ought I leave behind? What ought I to remember?

If Jesus or Mary were a guest at Isaiah House, what would they experience from me?

Conclusion

The above reflections and questions could be expanded upon for a longer retreat time, or condensed if there is limited presentation time. What I would like also to pursue is introducing some additions to Isaiah House, to make it more reflective of the values

²¹ Hebrews 13:2 (English Standard Version)

²² Mark 6:8-9 (NAB).

there and more conducive to relationship-building, both among the women present and those who come to be with them.

Several of the women who currently reside there are artists; I would love to see murals or signs painted or decorated by them in the kitchen and entry, with reminders such as: “Share your table”, or “We should look for someone to eat and drink with, before looking for something to eat and drink”(Epicurus), or “Offer hospitality to another without grumbling,”²³ or the quote above about entertaining angels, and more.

And because it can be difficult to care for whom we do not know, and to celebrate the women who live there, perhaps outside the kitchen could be installed a bulletin board acknowledging those with birthdays that month, with information about them gathered that reflects their uniqueness and perhaps a photo. It might involve answers to non-intrusive questions, such as,

What would your favorite dinner include?

What is something not too many people know about you?

In what ways are you creative?

Where did you grow up? Share a good memory about that place.

What’s your favorite color and piece of clothing?

Who is one person who’s influenced you and why?

I’d like to ask the women for more inspiration along these lines. Beverly, the resident poet, has posted some of her poetry and I’d like to continue that sharing.

²³ 1 Pet. 4:9 (New International Version).

I look forward to every Wednesday that I spend with the women of Isaiah House. Sometime I'm needed in the kitchen, but my favorite place is among them under the large shelter in the backyard. I banter with them, they tease me back, we catch up on each other's lives and health, and enjoy each other's company. It is a "home" for me, and one that I know others would be blessed in, as well. The camaraderie there, our being present to one another, must surely benefit the community of Christ.

Component II-Theological Foundations

If Jesus is known to us in the "breaking of the bread," why would it not be sufficient to encounter him in the Eucharist at Mass Sunday morning? By looking at Trinitarian theology, contemporary theological expression, Lukan table fellowship, Eucharistic belief and Christian hospitality, I will make the argument that it is vital to step outside our comfort zones, especially at mealtime, to participate, in what Fr. Gregory Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries, calls, "the creation of a community of kinship that God may recognize it."²⁴

Trinitarian Theology

Many people understand the doctrine of the Trinity, the central belief of the Christianity, as a study of God's hidden, inner life, how the three Persons relate to one another. But the very fact that the Three Persons commune with one another is significant. Relationship is modeled in God and we are called into relationship with him and each other, "According to the Christian view of the Trinity, God is a

²⁴ Fr. Gregory Boyle's talk, January 20, 2012, West Los Angeles United Methodist Church.

fundamentally relational reality, a loving communion of persons that spills over, reaching out and drawing us into the divine life.”²⁵

Catherine LaCugna also points out that as God is neither isolated nor solitary, but interactive, so too we must be. Perichoresis is the term for the ‘glue’ binding together the three persons of the Trinity in unity,

The Father is Father because he has a Son; the Son is Son only because he has a Father; the Spirit is Spirit only because of the love in which the Father begets the Son and the Son gives back to the Father. In pronouncing the Word (the Son), the Father breathes out the breath that is the Holy Spirit. The fruit of this love, the Spirit, loves the Father and the Son and is loved by them in an exchange of giving and communion that comes from eternity and ends in eternity. The Persons exist as Persons by reason of their eternal relationships with one another. The unity of the Trinity is made up of these relationships; it is a unity peculiar to the Trinity, a tri-unity.²⁶

This is central to our faith, and we begin every Easter Vigil recounting our creation story which witnesses God’s desire for relationship. Our Bible, from the very first book, reveals to us this God, “who does not remain self-sufficient and self-enclosed, but whose ecstatic self-expression caused there to be, for the very first time, anything at all (Gen. 1-3).”²⁷

And just as God seeks to be united with other persons, so also he intends for us to find salvation the same way, “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’”²⁸ From the beginning of our history God created people to be in relationship. God is not asking us to do or be anything he is not.

²⁵ Edward Hahnenberg, *Ministries: A Relational Approach* (New York, NY: The Crossword Publishing Company, 2003), 86.

²⁶ Leonardo Boff, as cited in Catherine Mowry La Cugna, *God for Us* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 276.

²⁷ LaCugna speaking, *Ibid.*, 319.

²⁸ Gen. 2:18 (NAB).

His Holiness Benedict XVI tells us the same, “Our relationship to God and our fellowship with man [sic] cannot be separated from each other.”²⁹ Isolation is not an option, “Man [sic] deals with God in coming to deal with his fellowmen.”³⁰ But although he states that our relationship with God necessitates a call to community, I assert that the “dealings” with each other can be more than a necessary togetherness, but a joyful, loving experience of salvation.

God reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ and in the Spirit. Jesus is the communion of divine and human. We look to him to see who we are (or who we are meant to be) and who God is. The Spirit is the bridge, the one who enables us to join God. The Spirit cannot be thought as apart from Father and Son and we cannot be apart from the rest of creation, if we are to find salvation. We are not to be solitary people, intent on our own salvation.

Contemporary Theological Expression

This challenges modern notions of individualism and autonomy. LaCugna claims that freedom is not total autonomy, “The freedom of the deified human being consists in being free-for, free-toward others, poised in the balance between self-possession and other-orientation.”³¹ At Sunday liturgy, we come together to be reminded of the importance of our relationship with our Creator, and then are launched forth, as it were, with the words, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” As God comes to self through another, we come to our ultimate, God-like self through taking care of each other.

²⁹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 93.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ La Cugna, *God for Us*, 290.

The intra-divine community of the Trinity models for us how we are to be. Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted that the physical presence of other Christians is a gift of grace and a “source of comparable joy and strength to the believer.”³² And we know that it is. There is grace in being with those who hold dear what we do. But I believe we are also called to stretch ourselves, and take the dangerous step of spending time with others not quite so like-minded, or who perhaps challenge us, or whom we exclude, or who have excluded us, especially, “the poor, the sick and the imprisoned.”³³

As Christians, we need to come to terms with the reasons we shut people out—individually, communally, and nationally. Miroslav Volf tells us we do so because “we desire what others have. More often than not, we exclude because in a world of scarce resources and contested power we want to secure possessions and wrest the power from others.”³⁴ This is not how we were called to be. The Old Testament begins with God welcoming humankind into the world he had created, and the Gospel stories end with Christ opening the door to new life. We are reminded of this every week as we hear again our sacred stories. Every Sunday we re-enact the expansive actions of a God who modeled for us complete and utter embrace, “The Eucharist is the ritual time in which we celebrate this divine ‘making-space-for-us-and-inviting-us-in.’”³⁵ It also centers around a table. This is not a coincidence. The table is where all come to be fed, physically and spiritually.

³² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers Inc., 1954), 8.

³³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York, Doubleday, 1995), 383.

³⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 78.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

Miroslav Volf proposes the radical notion of embrace as a response to exclusion. “And if we, the communal selves are called into eternal communion with the triune God, then true justice will always be on the way to embrace—to a place where we will belong together with our personal and cultural identities both preserved and transformed, but certainly enriched by the other.”³⁶

Not only ought we to learn to tolerate one another, but we are asked to open our arms and enfold another, the other, in grace. The idea is not originally his, however. Self-giving love was patterned by our suffering Messiah.

Stephen S. Dudek offers a dialogue ladder, with eight rungs, to facilitate connections within intercultural congregations, but which can also be applied to the coming together of disparate peoples. The gap between rich and poor, black and white, educated and not, can sometimes be a large one, in a parish or elsewhere, and the steps can be useful in forming relationships, especially the first three. The logical way to begin is by first welcoming the stranger, moving to sharing stories, and then to building relationships. This can be done in a number of environments, but he recommends a gastronomic route, “When it comes to building relationships with others, take advantage of opportunities that center around sharing food, and the simple senses.”³⁷ It is a natural place to begin the holy work of creating community: welcoming, sharing, becoming one.

Where else to embrace, but around a table, and with whom better, than those who have been excluded and are powerless? Again, we have Jesus as a model.

³⁶ Ibid., 225.

³⁷ Stephen S. Dudek, “Becoming Inclusive Communities of Faith,” *New Theology Review*. February 2008. 21(1), 48.

Lukan Table Fellowship

The table fellowship that is so prominent in Lukan writings reveals radically different meal partners of our Lord and Savior than we might be used to, “While meals in the ancient world often function to consolidate the boundary of an existing community, many meal scenes in Luke aim instead at breaking such boundaries.”³⁸ Jesus eats with those one might not expect, “tax collectors and sinners” (Lk. 5:30, 7:34, 15:10). The “tax collectors” represent those not in the mainstream, the outcasts (cf. 3:12; 18:9-14, 19:1-10) and the sinners, the unclean and impure (cf. 6:32-34; 18:13; 19:7). “By participating in fellowship with these stereotypical groups, the Lukan Jesus challenges the traditional boundaries of God’s community.”³⁹ Might not the local homeless shelter be a likely place to mimic the example of Jesus? Perhaps it is not only in a parish setting that ministry can happen.

Eucharistic Belief

It is however, in our parishes at Eucharist that we are continually reminded what it is we are called to do. In addition to embrace, Jesus’ self-gift models for us death to self, death to self-seeking, and death to a worldly way of living in order to experience a new life in community with others. This cross-over into new life is not a one-time experience. It must be committed to over and over again. Jesus crucified represents the despised and marginalized, the outsiders, “It is not possible to cross over in the sacrifice of the death of Jesus into the life of God, and to leave behind the poor and oppressed of

³⁸ David W. Pao, “Waiters or Preachers: Acts 6:1-7 and the Lukan Table Fellowship Motif,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*. April 2011. 130 (1), 127-144.

³⁹ Ibid.

the world. To accept the bread of the Eucharist is to accept to be bread and sustenance for the poor of the world.”⁴⁰ A changed life must be expressed in a changed lifestyle, and that means taking care of our less fortunate sisters and brothers in a very concrete sense.

Hospitality is a witness of the creative love of God.

Christian Hospitality

“Justice reminds us that the needs and interests of others are really inseparable from our own and that our own flourishing as individuals is tied to how well others fare.”⁴¹ In an ideal community, united by the Spirit, we learn to accept and be accepted as humans of dignity, as we recognize that each of us is an image of God. We cannot value each other less or more because of our differences. The Spirit works to bring us together, a disparate group, differing in age, abilities, and backgrounds. We have the opportunity to learn that our differences are a witness to a God rejoicing in uniqueness, “Some of the greatest rewards emerge from (our) capacity to learn from, tolerate, and even delight in each other’s idiosyncrasies.”⁴²

Henri Nouwen acknowledges that the term “hospitality” brings to mind images of “tea parties, bland conversation, and a general atmosphere of coziness...(but) if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Monika K. Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1976), 78.

⁴¹ Gula, 112.

⁴² Marty, 317.

⁴³ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York, NY: Image Book, 1975), 66.

Luke 14:12-14 makes very clear the difference between conventional and Christian hospitality:

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.⁴⁴

In welcoming those who might make us uncomfortable, and who cannot reciprocate, we reflect the open-armed, abounding in generosity, welcome of God.

Leia Smith, director of the Isaiah House, knows from experience that food “starts the conversation.” It can be awkward to broach a stranger, but offering food initiates dialogue. Her call, she believes, is to “open up space where birth can happen.” Sharing our common need for and interest in food, might lead us to the recognition, that we are more alike than we might have thought, “Hospitality has depended upon recognizing our commonalities rather than our differences, seeing strangers as neighbors, brothers, and sisters.”⁴⁵

All in Need of Healing

Unfortunately, we bring more to the table than just food. We bring our whole unique selves, which also includes those characteristics that are not so life-giving: needs, selfishness and defenses. We bring a lifetime of unexamined assumptions and an image of ourselves that wants to project well. Playing the part of the host is an enviable one.

⁴⁴ NRSV

⁴⁵ Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 98.

Everyone wants to be thought of as the Good Samaritan. No one chooses to be the one in need of help. We want to avoid vulnerability.

Just as the disciples were advised in Mark 6:7-13 “to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick-no food, no sack, no money in their belts,” so too we need to leave behind our judgments and misconceptions that we so easily make about our less fortunate sisters and brothers.

If we have not often experienced need or marginality, we might not be able to identify with being on the receiving end, and all that that entails. Evagrius Ponticus, a Christian monk and ascetic of the fourth century, writes, “there is great shame from accepting the necessities of life from another.”⁴⁶ Father Gregory Boyle speaks of shame being the root of all addictions. It affects not only our relationship with others, but that with our Creator, “Shame has a profound effect on one’s intra-and interpersonal life. It has the power to induce feelings of inadequacy about oneself, inferiority relative to others, and a sense of deficiency relative to a relationship with God.”⁴⁷

There is a danger of perpetuating this debilitating sense of shame if we are not able to approach the other with humility. Spending time is necessary, as is a willingness to spend self. We can insist upon maintaining the distinction between server and served, giver and recipient, or we can realize that as Father Boyle proclaims: “we are mutually in need of healing.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer* (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 17.

⁴⁷ Bowler, 26.

⁴⁸ Fr. Gregory Boyle’s talk, January 20, 2012, West LA United Methodist Church

Meister Eckhart was “not so much concerned with works as with the spirit with which we perform them.”⁴⁹ Boyle speaks along the same lines when he says that the measure of compassion does not equal service, but the willingness to be in kinship with another. If we insist on taking the role of hosts, and therefore allocate the role of guest to the one in need, we reinforce the stigma already there. The provider of food/resources must be able to receive also, even, and perhaps especially from one who has little to give, “There is a complex dance between recognizing our own need, ministering to those in need, and recognizing their ministry to us.”⁵⁰

Jesus, man and God, served and allowed himself to be served. He asked the woman at the well for water, a woman ostracized by her community for the life she led, and in so doing, empowered her. She became both server and served, as he also was. She gave him, a thirsty man, a drink, and he in turn, gave her a new chance for life: eternal life in heaven, and a new life accepted by the community she was estranged from.

Hospitality, done with an open and loving heart, is a way of sharing the gifts God has given, and imitating the expansive actions of our gift-giving God. “It is a means of grace, a way both of receiving God’s grace and being in tune with the gracious life of the world. It is a way of passing on God’s grace and being graced in return.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies, (New York, NY:Penguin Classics, 1994), 26.

⁵⁰ Pohl, 119.

⁵¹ Shannon L. Jung, *Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 51.

Component III-Reflection on Theology of Ministry

The application for LMU's Master's program that I wrote four years ago revealed that one of my interests in pastoral theology was the capacity for change in adults. I noted that I saw so many of my adult ESL students had made huge transitions in their lives; leaving behind families, friends and a country whose language they knew. In contrast, while the women I knew in a parish in Orange County, educated and wealthy, at least in comparison to my students, were much more reluctant or unwilling to risk much. I wrote, "I know God's word has the power to transform...and that it is not psychology or self-improvement books that will make us what we are meant to be, but the Holy Spirit in our lives." I wanted to know more of how to participate in the growth process. While initially focusing on the growth of others, I've ended up being changed myself!

I have learned much in these past few years. It seems contradictory to me sometimes, that if I want to know more about my God, I first need to examine my self, but this is true. "Inner work-the process of knowing, healing, and harmonizing our inner life-is the essence of spirituality because it is our inner life that influences our perceptions, desires, thoughts and actions."⁵²

One of the first, and most important things I've become aware of is my tendency towards criticism. I can be so harsh on others, and also on myself. Noreen Cannon and Wilkie Au speak in *Urgings of the Heart* of how "lack of self-love and the resulting self-rejection impede loving because what we cannot accept in ourselves we invariably reject

⁵² Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon, *Urgings of the Heart* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 26.

in others.”⁵³ This rejection of self separates us not only from our fellow sisters and brothers, but also our Creator. It became apparent when I was asked in class to reflect on the story of the Prodigal Son and identify with the characters there. I related to both younger and older brother: the older for his sense of entitlement and holding grudges, the younger for his sinfulness and greed. It never occurred to me, until I was challenged by a professor, that the two might have positive traits. What of the independence and sense of adventure of the younger, and of the humility he reflected at the end? What of the steadfastness and trustworthiness of the older brother? I realize I look at “morality” stories to discern the “wrong” in them; what I ought not to be doing, rather than the “right course of action.” I knew the father figure was acting correctly, but I dismissed his two sons as being the bad characters, who were not to be emulated. I discovered that my cognitive style tends more towards “either/or” than “both/and”, which came as a surprise to me, as it is the opposite of what I espouse.

This critical view extends also to others around me. I am quick to judge where colleagues, friends and family members need work, and forget that we ALL are in different places on the path to self-transcendence. Others’ pettiness, rigidity, and other issues I’ve determined they have, reflect my discontent and call me to deeper self-examination. I’m becoming wiser, through introspection, in the knowledge that all of us are struggling with issues from our childhood, and as a parent, have learned to ask forgiveness of my children for the ways I have limited their freedom. I have learned to identify unrest in myself, and take a few moments and sit with it, asking myself, “what is this critical attitude/irritation/anger trying to tell me?” This is new for me, and I’m so

⁵³ Ibid., 3.

grateful that even at this late stage of life, I've been brought to it by my studies. Even being brought to this awareness is a gift, "wholeness is not our idea; it is God's,"⁵⁴ and I'm committed to transforming into being more alive and more whole, not remaining so prone to noticing where others fall short.

I have learned that I need to spend time in reflection and prayer in order to become more fully who God intended me to be. My prayer life has changed. Instead of checking emails first thing in the morning, I pray over the readings of the day, and examine the previous day's events to see where God was that I might not have noticed. It is not always an easy thing, but making it a habit has been a good choice. "Contemplation requires the willingness, honesty, and courageous desire to face into ourselves just as we are and our world just as it is-no distortions, no exclusions, no avoidances, no anesthesia. It means entering into our own emptiness, our unrequited longing."⁵⁵

We are all wounded in some way, some more than others. "It is unlove that makes people unwell and love and love alone that makes them well again,"⁵⁶ spiritual writer Thomas Hart reminds us. Just as I have benefitted from a growing self-awareness, aided by spiritual direction and classmates who have listened, without judgment and with love, I want to do the same for others, especially the women at Isaiah House.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁵ Gerard G. May, *The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love You Need* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993), 193.

⁵⁶ Thomas Hart, *The Art of Christian Listening* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980), 16.

A Ministry of Presence

Being present is the first step. It is not as easy as it sounds, I have learned, in my engagement with the women both as a spiritual director, and as a witness of Christ at Isaiah House. It involves moving out of my typical self-preoccupation in order to focus on another. “Presence means being at home in ourselves, fully there. If we are preoccupied with our worries, our griefs, our “To Do” lists, we are separated, cut off from the present moment and the deeper reality of God’s presence and of anyone or anything else. To be present means to be consciously experiencing, noticing, responding.”⁵⁷

It requires listening: listening with all of your faculties, but most especially your heart. It necessitates prioritizing the other, and squelching the desire to jump in, to agree or disagree, to relate a similar experience. This is hard to do. “Listening is the first part of a conversation and dialogue... We understand the other largely in analogy to our own experiences, although even here, as in all experience, new elements from the other’s experience occasionally break through our fore-concepts.”⁵⁸

While an ongoing challenge, active and empathic listening is vital. Being as open and present as we are able, and prayerfully examining those times we are not, enable us to be Christ to one another. We embody his love and acceptance, and in so doing, allow others to experience his all-encompassing care for them.

⁵⁷ Janet Ruffing, “Living Contemplatively in Chaotic Times” in *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers: Perspectives for the 21st Century, Volume 2*, ed. Roger J. Wicks (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 426.

⁵⁸ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 286.

This kind of caring presence, unbelievable to me at first, is a ministry. It changes people, and it has changed me. As a minister serves, “she relates not only to other persons within her community but also to those outside the church; she is part of a church both local and universal; and these horizontal relations with other human beings and structures flow out of her vertical relationship with God through Christ in the Spirit.”⁵⁹ Ministry is relational and we become truer selves when we are in right relationship with one another. I have been able to experience this.

Last fall, I noticed Bobby, an artistic woman with a strong faith, going to lie down at Isaiah House, earlier than usual. She had just been diagnosed the day before with a broken shoulder dating back from July, when she had been hit by a car riding her bike across the street. She was upset at many things: at herself for not realizing it might have been broken, at facing a long prospect of healing, and at the way the officer at the scene had demeaned her and discouraged her from going to the hospital. “I’m not a bum,” she told me, “I deserved to be treated better.” I sat and listened, and she revealed more pain caused by numerous things: by being named “Bobby” because her parents wanted a boy, by a difficult relationship with her sister, by her daughter abusing her physically, and lying to the police that the opposite had happened, resulting in three days in jail, by long-term care-giving for her parents, and by losing the house she was raised in. We held hands, laughed about her sister, cried about her parents and daughter, shared our struggles of being “helped” and not being the “helper.” I mentioned how much I admired her lack of bitterness, which affirmed for her what a psychologist had told her. Usually there is not much privacy available for such intimate conversations, but it was getting dark early

⁵⁹ Hahnenberg, 92.

and the shades were drawn around the sleeping pavilion outside, which helped to provide the necessary hospitable “space.”

This is the spiritual direction I am meant to do. I spoke later with other women, but left a little earlier than usual, feeling as if I had done what I’d been called to do that day. On the way home from the shelter that night, I had an experience I have felt before. My heart, and the whole left side of my upper body felt open and exposed and loved and loving at the same time. It is the most amazing thing; like what I first felt a year ago, when we practiced an hour a week in prayer in Wilkie Au’s Ignatian Spirituality class. In prayer, when I asked God if he wanted my friendship and he answered me in an amazingly intimate way. Wilkie helped me define it as a touchstone moment, and I’ve felt something similar, though not as intense, since. I realized then, that it happens to me most of the time just after I leave the shelter, in the car on the way home. I hadn’t made the connection before, the significance of when it comes to me. It almost feels like I’m breastfeeding, as if I’m participating in life-giving and being nurtured at the same time. In the language of Ignatian spirituality, Jesus reveals his love to me in these “consolation” experiences.

I had been questioning a week before, what I was being called to do with my studies. This was confirmation that what I do at the Home is good enough and my call to collaborative ministry with Christ. Being with the women in the shelter is so satisfying and blessed, in a way nothing else is. In probing for possible transference issues with the women at the shelter, a fellow student had asked me, during a listening session a few weeks earlier, where I felt or had felt “homeless” in my life. I knew the answer right away. I had felt it not with my husband, friends, or children, but as a child, the oldest of

nine children. I was always the odd one in my family, in school, “the nerd” who read all the time, who was a little “off” or just made to feel that way. My four sisters do not get together too often, but do go out to lunch for each of their birthdays, but not mine. Even my mom asked me recently why I “have to do everything differently.” She was referring to my home decorating, but I think the disapproval would apply to other aspects of my life. I know now that we all carry hurts from our past, and that she and my sisters bear their own.

I do feel at home at the Isaiah House, with “sisters” I have now that I have not experienced before. It IS a “home” environment for me. I share friendly banter with them, and we enjoy each other’s company. I modified the following from an article, hoping it might some day apply to me. I realize that the women there do the same for me. They help me heal.

Because I trusted her, she trusts herself more;

because I cared for her, she is now more capable of caring for herself;

because I invited her to challenge herself and because I took the risk of challenging her, she is now better able to challenge herself.

Because of the way I related to her, she now relates better both to herself and to others.

Because I respected her inner resources, she is now more likely to tap those resources.⁶⁰

They have also taught me that even though they have suffered much, God has been and is with them. Many have told me they have lost husbands, children, and jobs, in addition to their homes. But several have expressed that they are in a better place now, and they do

⁶⁰ Gerard Egan, *The Skilled Helper* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1990), 56.

not mean Isaiah House. My husband and I experienced a financial setback two years ago, with the real fear that we would lose our home. It was a difficult time, and still is, but the abiding faith witnessed in the women, and their confidence that God will always take care of them, reassure me that I too will not be neglected, no matter what tragedies befall.

But there is something more. I believe Isaiah House is a sacred place because it is a place where transition and transformation is taking place. The relationships that have been broken, the upheaval the women have experienced, are part of a new life, a new beginning for them.

What is important to realize is that it is in the very experience of darkness and joylessness, in the suffering and withdrawal of accustomed pleasure, that this transformation is taking place. Transfiguration does not happen at the end of the road; it is in the making now. If we could see the underside of this death, we would realize it is already resurrection. Since we are not educated for darkness, however, we see this experience, because of the shape it takes, as death. Dark night is instead a sign of life, of growth, of development in our relationship with God, in our best human relationships, and in our societal life.⁶¹

Only God knows what is truly happening in the human heart, but I believe there is something sacred in the healing that is happening there. It is holy ground, and I am privileged to witness to it.

It is ironic that the women there who are “homeless” are perhaps getting to feel more comfortable in their own skin, and becoming more authentic humans than those of us who have not been so challenged. “It is precisely as broken, poor, and powerless that one opens oneself to the dark mystery of God in loving, peaceful waiting.”⁶² Perhaps those of us in comfortable homes, who frequently forget how dependent we truly are, are

⁶¹ Constance Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night”, in *Women’s Spirituality*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 414.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 420.

the homeless ones. I cannot assume to know where the women of Isaiah House stand in relation to themselves and to God, but I stand in awe at what they have survived, and what they have to bear.

“It is an experience of mutuality in that we are open to another as well as ourselves, consciously available to being affected by the other.”⁶³ I need to be careful with the responsibility I have at Isaiah House. I ring at the front door, and am allowed in; the women enter through the back. I can bounce from the backyard to the kitchen to check on dinner, and back to the yard to give tantalizing hints to the women about what is being prepared. I can drive away at the end of the evening, to a warm bed which is not a few feet away from dozens of women, and a shower as long as I would like. “Most needy strangers have not chosen their marginal identity and cannot easily abandon it. The ability to leave marginality behind means the person has a certain power in relationships.”⁶⁴ It is crucial that I remember this.

I have made insensitive mistakes. In my haste to be comfortable with the women, I suggested to Leia that they wear name tags so we who served them dinner could more quickly learn their names. She was rightly offended at my self-serving efforts, which would have compounded the pain of those who have already been dehumanized. My offer of a photo board, labeled with their names, was equally contrary to treating them with respect. A gentleman who comes monthly to be of assistance, attempted to share with me his doubt in God’s existence, even as he goes to Mass daily, and I ended that conversation, as my intention was to be present to the women whom I determined had

⁶³ Ruffing, 426.

⁶⁴ Pohl, 120.

more of a need than he did. Even in attempting to serve, I continue to place my own desires above others’.

But I am learning and I trust that God will continue to reveal to me what it is I am meant to do, if only I am attentive. “To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.”⁶⁵ Something calls me there, to participate in this odd Spirit-filled combination of healing and being healed, to “both feelings of helplessness and simultaneously a mysterious empowerment.”⁶⁶

“Be still,” God instructs Moses to tell his people, “but keep moving.”⁶⁷ I have acquired much in these last four years: the consolation of faith-filled friends, wisdom from brilliant instructors, and joy in this mind and soul-expanding process. The real life-changer has been learning to assimilate service, contemplation and prayer into my life. I am so grateful that I have discovered and am able to do the work for which I was created and called. A spiritual director related to me last year when I was discerning what it was I was meant to be doing with my degree; “One doesn’t study theology to become rich; one studies it to be transformed”. And I have been!

⁶⁵ Mary Oliver, quoted in Ruffing, 423.

⁶⁶ Ruffing, 437.

⁶⁷ Exod. 14:14-15.

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