

Corporal works of Mercy

by

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Feed the Hungry; Give Drink to the thirsty; Harbour the harbourless; Visit the sick; Ransom the captive; Bury the dead.

Spiritual Works of Mercy

To instruct the ignorant; Counsel the doubtful; Admonish sinners; Bear wrongs patiently; Forgive offenses willingly; Comfort the afflicted; Pray for the living and the dead.

My call to ministry in spiritual care is highly influenced by the Catholic tradition of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. As a lay catholic woman I encountered the corporal works of mercy in religious education as an adolescent and participated in the community service throughout high school and my college years at the University of Notre Dame. It was not until I encountered the spiritual works of mercy later in life that this tradition began to inform my ministry.

The traditional understanding of these acts includes visiting the sick and comforting the afflicted. These works are scripturally based in the Gospel of Matthew 25: 31-40;

'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' ...The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'

My ministry has always been impacted by this gospel passage. It was what first inspired me work as a community organizer. After graduating from college I dedicated my work to advocate for immigration reform, feeling the call to welcome the stranger. It was this passage from Matthew that also began my inquiry into providing ministry in the hospital.

Although not required to participate in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) as part of my divinity school curriculum, I decided to dedicate a summer to hospital ministry not only heed the call to visit the sick but also explore my pastoral identity and authority. I participated as a CPE Chaplain intern at the Methodist Hospital in Houston, TX the summer of 2010. The experience proved invaluable to my ministerial formation. My experience in CPE unit was challenging but affirming. It was an opportunity to dive into full time ministry and discover different ways to use and develop the talents God has given me to provide spiritual care.

It was a necessary change of environment after my first year of divinity school. Harvard Divinity School challenges my intellectual and academic capacities as I am challenged to integrate my intellectual life with my religious tradition and spiritual life. However CPE and hospital ministry challenged my hearts capacity to be fully present to those facing suffering.

CPE was an opportunity to identify places where I needed to grow and one of those areas was working in diverse contexts. I am Mexican American my father is an immigrant from northern Mexico. My experience in ministry has always been within the context of serving Latino families. In my work experience I had developed a competency in working with Latino families and other families of color but during my summer CPE unit I became aware that I find my capacity limited when providing pastoral care to people from dominant culture. I have always identified my ability to work across diversity as a strength but in my initial weeks of CPE I realized that my scope of diversity was limited. I did not realize that working across diversity included my working with patients from dominant culture.

When I began the CPE unit I had great difficulty connecting to some patients, specifically older white males, because of my lack of experience but also due to a lack of confidence in my

own pastoral authority. This insecurity is shaped somewhat by my religious context as a young lay Catholic woman. Although there are countless lay women offering their ministries to sustain the Catholic Church, the institutional church often fails to recognize or celebrate their work. I struggled to gain confidence in my pastoral authority because although I know I have talents and a desire to provide spiritual care, I am self-conscious about how others will perceive my authority. As a lay person I know that some will not respond to me as they would a member of the clergy.

After working ten weeks in a hospital unit with a large number of older white male patients and with the support of my CPE peers and supervisor I was able to develop more confidence in my pastoral presence. I confronted my anxieties and insecurities related to my pastoral authority and offered pastoral care to all my patients and their families. I continue to work on my confidence in my talents in providing empathic listening and culturally competent spiritual care.

CPE was also an opportunity for me to engage in deeper theological reflection, particularly related to my ministry. I came to discern that my understanding of eschatology also influences my ministry as it provides for me an imperative to serve others and serve God in order to build the kingdom of God on earth. I am influenced by liberation and feminist theologies that define the *basileia* as the realm of God. This interpretation allows for an understanding of the kingdom not as an end of time but a present possibility. The influence of liberation theologies that promote a liberative praxis also push me to identify my responsibility as a Christian to take part in building the realm of God on earth. This inspiration motivated my work in social justice and continues to inform my ministry as I reflect on Revelation 21:3, “*and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They*

will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes." This passage of Revelation reveals the depth of God's love and compassion.

When I question how this realm takes place in the now, I think about the ministry of presence that is a part of spiritual care and I see how the sincere gesture of providing a presence and receiving the stories and emotions of another is a spiritual act. It is an act where God is present. God indeed wipes away tears.

This presence is a part of the work that chaplains do in the hospital. A few times during my ministry at the hospital I encountered tears. I am not uncomfortable with tears as I understand their healing power. However I am always taken aback when prayer leads to the release of tears. During an initial visit with a patient that had been in the hospital over thirty days due to a recurring infection I encountered tears. The patient's wife was distressed because although her husband was out of the ICU, it was still unforeseeable how much longer he would remain in the hospital. After hearing the medical situation and the uncertainty the family was facing I offered prayer. I prayed for the family including their intentions and a request for blessings of wisdom on the staff and strength for the entire family. I do not recall the words exactly but the prayer provoked tears in the woman. I tried to console her but she expressed how she had been emotionally fragile in those days and she assured me she would be ok drawing the visit to a close. I understand that sometimes sincerity in prayer gives permission to acknowledge the severity of the situation and let those tears fall. Although nothing I can say will eliminate anxieties the understanding that God sees those tears is consoling and is affirming of God's love and grace.

My work experience as a community organizer working with immigrant families greatly influenced my pastoral identity. It was a ministry that helped me develop my ability to listen and

to be perceptive of emotions and family dynamics. My work with immigrant families and families in poverty allowed me to walk with families that experienced trauma, although not medical, often issues of life and death. It was those experiences that brought me to pursue ministry and attempt chaplaincy. I have been with people as they faced grief and loss. This prepared me emotionally to sit with the intensity of pastoral care in chaplaincy.

On my first on call shift at the hospital four patients expired. Four families experienced profound grief and loss. At 8:30 in the morning I performed a Service of Letting Go for a family that was removing mechanical support of their loved one, the great matriarch of a large Latino family. Generations of the family were gathered to commend the patient to God. At 10:30 am I prayed with the same family as the patient passed on. Later that day, I listened to the memories of a man who lost his partner. I shared grief support information with this man's friends that in addition to their grief experience were experiencing worry for their loved one who must continue life without his love. Two hours later I provided pastoral care to a woman who lost her father. I waited with her as she shared memories of him and made calls to her loved ones that were to come to see and say goodbye to their dad and brother. The day ended with a call to attend a hysterical wife who between deep sobs of anguish made the decision to end the code blue process as her husband would have wished. I stayed with her as she waited for her family and for her husband to take his last breaths. The day was a marathon of raw emotions. The only way that I was able to make it through the day without falling to pieces was the endurance for encountering helplessness and suffering I had to develop while ministering to families that grieved the loss of loved ones due to deportation.

I still question how I made it through that day. Needless to say that day ended with me collapsing on my couch at home with a box of tissues at but I remembered that the staff

chaplains always reassured me that you are never really alone in the hospital. I was not alone and neither were the families who experienced loss that day. God wiped my tears away that night in deep moments of prayer that continues to guide my ministry. God is present in the love manifested through my supportive family and friends. Although I did not see the families I encountered on call after that Saturday I know that God continued to comfort their afflictions and console the grief after they left the hospital.

My CPE experience affirmed that I have been called and given the talents to provide spiritual care, even as a young lay woman. It affirmed in me the importance of trusting in God and in the talents God has given us for the service of others. It was an invaluable experiences for my ministry and it something I would do again. It is through this service and works we offer to others that God's mercy is shared in abundance and in which God's love reigns in the world.