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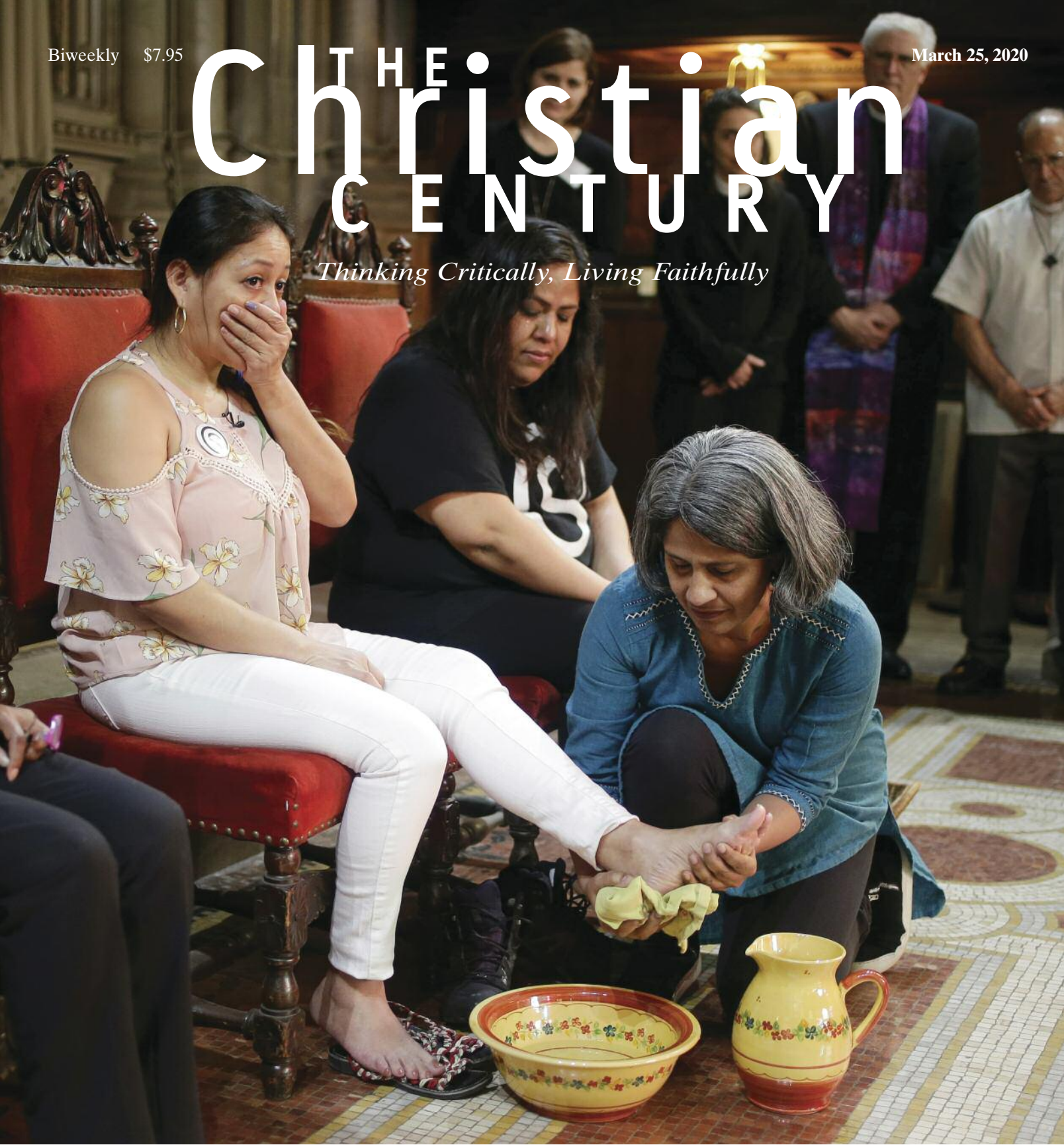
March 25, 2020

THE Christian CENTURY

Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully



The strange intimacy of foot washing

WASHINGTON ISLAND FORUM

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with Kaitlin B. Curtice

Kaitlin B. Curtice is an enrolled member of the Potawatomi Nation who has grown up in the Christian faith. She writes and speaks on the intersection of Indigenous spirituality, faith in everyday life, and the church. She is author of *Glory Happening* (2017) and a new book coming out this spring.

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From the editor/publisher

Peter W. Marty

A good finish

When Nancy died at the age of 95, her death wasn't of cancer, stroke, or a car crash. She died of a completed life. Decades of faithful and fruitful living, replete with Nancy's spark of love spreading infectiously to others, had left her tired at the end. She finished her last breaths inhaling family love and exhaling peace.

It didn't take long for me to settle on a reading for Nancy's funeral. I chose a passage from the Passion narrative in John's Gospel, right after Jesus, dangling from the cross, commends his beloved disciple and his mother to each other's care:

> After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:28–30)

For some guests who showed up that day to remember Jane's vivacity, these verses must have felt like a mistaken reading, an error in judgment, a bucket of cold water tossed onto what was supposed to be a celebration of life. I selected them quite specifically, however, to remind all of us present of the need to try to stop viewing every death as the snuffing out of a good life. Since death is part of the bargain of receiving life in the first place, it seems strange that we would regularly view it as a concession of defeat, the sad acknowledgment of a spent life, a painful resignation. Why should death be seen only as losing?

What catches most eyes about John's account of the end of Jesus' life is that it is clearly finished. It's over. Done with. Gone. He not only knows his life is finished, he says so. That he "gave up his spirit" might sound to a casual reader like he is throwing in the towel when there is no more zip left in him. But that's not what's behind the meaning of the word *finished*.

It isn't the same kind of finished as when I quit the freshman swim team in high school after only one week of practice. The eight laps that constituted our warm-up every day were more than I could handle. I lacked form, muscles, or experience of any spectacular measure. I remember crawling out of the pool gasping in exhaustion, trying my best not to look embarrassed. I literally threw my towel into the wicker basket after the fourth day. I was finished with competitive swimming forever.

When Jesus says, "It is finished," the Greek word is *tetelestai*, from the root *teleo* or *telos*. His life has reached its proper end or goal—in terms of not depletion but completion, not quitting but fulfilling. Jesus has accomplished that for which he came into the world. He attains his *telos*, his purpose, embodying the love command in its many expressions. In the end, he dies a completed life, not a finished-off life. Far shorter than Nancy's yet longer than some others, his life offers us all a fresh way of looking at death.

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IN THIS Issue

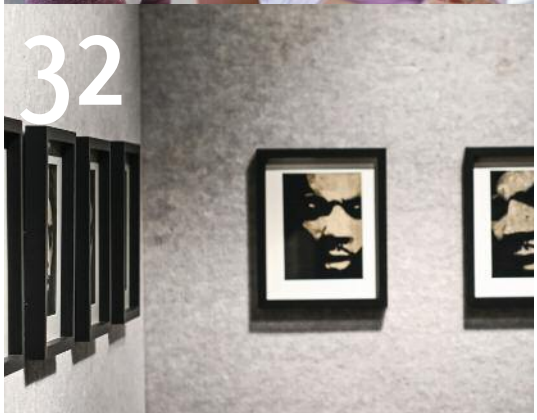
On the cover: Aura Hernandez, an undocumented immigrant who took sanctuary in a New York church in 2018 to avoid being deported and separated from her family, has her feet washed at a Maundy Thursday service. (© AP Photo / Seth Wenig)

NEWS

IN REVIEW

COLUMNS

POETRY



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Business and divinity

I applaud Andover Newton Seminary for recognizing the need for those in church ministry to have a baseline understanding of business practices ("The business of church," Feb. 12).

Sarah Drummond's article mentions Andover Newton students who expressed some sense of disconnect between their studies and those in the business school. In one instance the business students seemed to express disdain for the thinking of the divinity students. This shines light on an important point about the age in which we are living: a singular focus on return on investment.

Would not a reciprocal agreement be appropriate? Business students might not need to take classes in theology or denominational issues, but this article clearly shows how much they could benefit from a few courses in ethics (not business ethics, which seems to have taken on a life of its own with no connection to the original meaning of the word), moral thinking, justice, and equality.

Brenda Boldin
Winchester, Va.

Grief for Nicaragua . . .

Whenever I read an article like Philip Jenkins's "Liberator to dictator" (Feb. 12), my grief over lost opportunities and the failure of the revolution in Nicaragua rises again.

I was a seminary student during the Contra war. I spent three weeks in Central America in 1985, and I signed the Pledge of Resistance. Every Thursday morning during those days I was with a group of people outside the federal building in Louisville, praying for peace in Central America. I remember being interviewed by a radio station one day and saying that I wasn't necessarily for the Sandinista party, but I had heard enough to know that the people of Nicaragua had hope for a better life and deserved a chance to build it.

Our government didn't give them a chance, and I've always wondered how the trajectory of Daniel Ortega's life would have been different had the US supported his efforts instead of trying to destroy his country. It's probably too much to say that the US made Ortega a dictator, but we never did try to befriend him. The legacy of our distrust and imperialism and the results of the counterrevolution are clear in Jenkins's analysis. Our country's policies and actions are at least partly responsible for what is happening now in Nicaragua.

Sam Pendergrast
Rome, N.Y.

Giving testimony . . .

Debie Thomas's recent column took me back to my elementary school days in a Sunday night "testimony meeting" at the Free Methodist church where my father was pastor ("The truth about testimonies," Feb. 26). Each person was invited to say what prompted him or her to be present for worship. Listening to the dramatic offerings by the faithful, I suddenly realized that my turn was coming and I was gripped by panic.

Fortunately, my older sister was sitting on the aisle side of our pew, and she went first. She stood and testified boldly, "I'm here tonight because my mother made me come!"

Seizing the moment, I jumped to my feet and said, "Me too!" If nothing else, we preacher's kids were truth tellers.

Now, after two graduate theological degrees and 52 years of ordained ministry, I can testify boldly, "I'm here because my mother made me come." That's my testimony, and I'm sticking with it.

Daniel Garrett
Costa Mesa, Calif.

THE Christian CENTURY

L'Arche after Vanier

March 25, 2020

When Jean Vanier died last May, tributes poured in. He was praised (including in these pages) for the vision that inspired more than 150 L'Arche communities—each built around "core members" with intellectual disabilities—and in turn the wider church and world.

But an investigation into Vanier, initiated by L'Arche International before he died, was recently made public (see news story on p. 12). Six women, including former L'Arche community members (not core members), allege that Vanier sexually abused them. Their stories are notably similar, and the inquiry found no reason to doubt them. It also revealed that when Thomas Philippe, Vanier's mentor, was sanctioned by the Vatican in 1956, Vanier knew that one reason was Philippe's own abuse of women—yet he cleared a path for Philippe's involvement with L'Arche anyway. For decades, Vanier used his status at L'Arche to harm others.

He also appears to have weaponized his own influential ideas. L'Arche values spiritual accompaniment: community members are expected to accompany others, and be accompanied themselves, in relationships emphasizing mutuality that transcends status. Several women report that Vanier initiated sexual contact within an accompaniment context. "I was frozen," one reported. "I was unable to distinguish what was right and what was wrong. . . . He told me that this was part of the accompaniment."

Another L'Arche hallmark is the embrace of vulnerability, that of core members and others alike. Vanier's accusers described their own vulnerability at the time in question. "I was very upset and very vulnerable," said one; Vanier's response was to tell her to come see him late at night.

Values like these can be twisted; they have shadow sides. Within a communal context, accompaniment relationships can be fraught with problems of power. Vulnerability and mutuality can eclipse individual dignity instead of nurturing it. Add the patriarchal theology of the priest Vanier saw as his "spiritual father"—Philippe reportedly once silenced a victim's protests by calling himself an instrument of God—and the danger comes into focus.

Yet mutuality, vulnerability, and accompaniment are also genuinely, desperately needed in the world—no less now than before these allegations. Such values are bigger than Vanier, and they continue to shape L'Arche communities and their witness for the better.

It took courage for these women to report the harm caused by Vanier, given his status and the threat a reckoning might pose to L'Arche's work. L'Arche International's response has been largely impressive as well. The investigation its leaders launched last year was truly independent, and when it came back with damning evidence, they took that evidence seriously. They have unequivocally condemned Vanier's actions, and they are working to improve existing accountability systems. Like the women who came forward, L'Arche International's leaders know that their work has never been about Vanier.

> L'Arche is centered around people with far less power than its founder had.

L'Arche communities around the world know this too. They embody it. They aren't centered on a spiritual celebrity once thought to be a lock for canonization. They are centered on some of society's most vulnerable members, whose presence brings life to all involved.

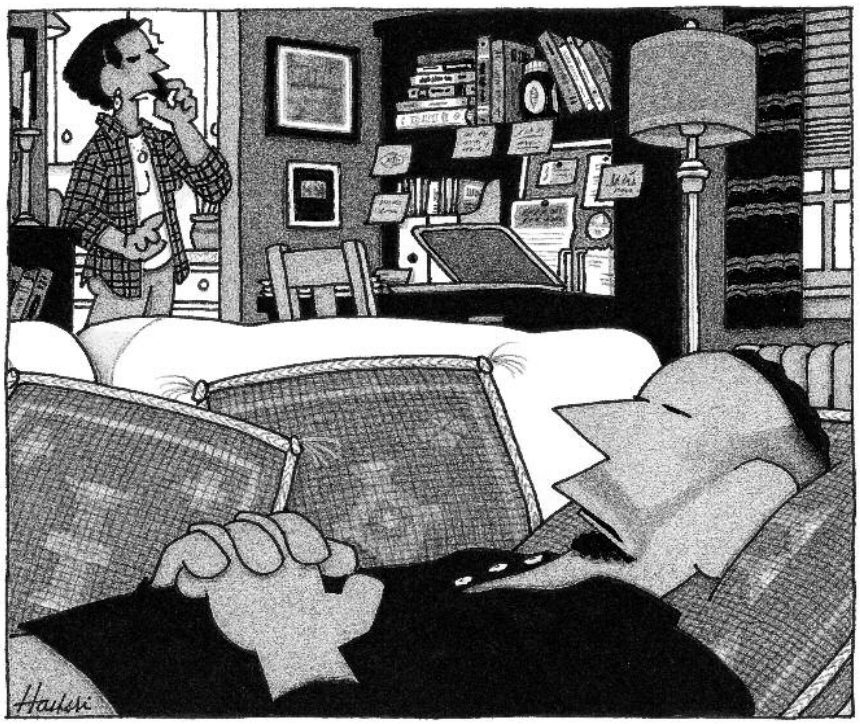
—The Editors

CENTURY marks

FREE GIFT: Jean Bellini, a US Catholic sister who works in the Brazilian Amazon, once noticed that a farmer had an excess of oranges. She encouraged him to sell them in a local market. "If I have too many oranges, I give them to people who don't have oranges," he said. "They're a free gift from God." Bellini took this as a lesson that she couldn't tell poor people how to fix their own problems; to accompany them in their suffering she needed to ask what they find helpful. She said her goal "isn't to make progress in the world," but to help people "grow more independent, better yet, interdependent" (*New Yorker*, February 17).

HONEST ENGAGEMENT: In January, students at St. Olaf, a Lutheran-affiliated college in Northfield, Minnesota, signed up for a red-blue workshop with Better Angels, an organization that tries to bridge the political polarization that plagues the American populace. Participants in the workshop came from Students for Life, an antiabortion club, and the Institute for Freedom and Community, a center for free inquiry. Addie Jo Lambrecht, who attended expecting to have to defend her conservative values, reported being pleasantly surprised to find that honest, nondefensive introspection led her to see some problems with her own views (*City Pages*, February 19).

RELIGIOUS RIGHTS: A study of British and American attitudes toward religious freedom indicates that 80 percent of Brits and 89 percent of Americans agree that freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right. Most Americans and Brits also agree that "countries with more religious freedoms are more peaceful than countries with fewer religious freedoms." Most also agree that countries with greater religious freedoms have stronger economies and more innovative societies than those with religious restrictions (British Council, 2019).



"He seems to have drifted from online activism to couch-based complacency."

SINGING TOGETHER: According to a recent study by Chorus America, 17 percent of Americans participate in a choir of some kind, up from 14 percent in 2008. The study indicates that singing in groups contributes to better mental and physical health, better social skills, and greater civic engagement and volunteerism. Although singing in church choirs is on the decline, around the country choirs with a dedicated purpose are popping up: they sing for people in hospice care, at retirement communities, or for people who are homeless (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 3).

FEELING MUSIC: It only takes 13 minutes of listening to music to experience decreased muscle tension, the release of negative thoughts, peaceful and contented feelings, and the ability to sleep better. That's the conclusion reached by a study done by the British Academy of Sound Therapy called "Music as Medicine." The best music for relaxing has a slow tempo with a simple melody and no lyrics. And it only takes nine minutes of music to feel an uplift—ideally songs with driving rhythm, fast tempo, and positive lyrics (Classic FM, February 6).

STRESSED OUT: Clergy in America are facing new levels of stress in their work. Rabbis worry about protecting their people from anti-Semitic violence, Muslim leaders are unnerved by anti-Muslim sentiments and actions, Catholic priests carry

the burden of a priest shortage and the sexual abuse crisis, and Protestant pastors worry about membership loss, drug addiction, and financial insecurity in their communities. Adding to the stress are clergy-bashing from congregants and loss of social esteem (AP, February 18).

ATTENTION, CEOS: Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock, the world's largest investment firm, is known for sending an annual letter to other CEOs that gets their attention. This year's letter was a blunt warning about the realities of climate change. Fink explained that BlackRock would avoid investments in companies with high sustainability risks, start to exit investment in companies involved in coal production, and vote against corporate managers who aren't making progress in fighting the climate crisis. Fink thinks capital markets are more likely to address the climate crisis than governments (CNBC, January 23).

HOME AGAIN: Mexican immigrants who have lived in the United States for decades often wish to be buried back in their homeland. The Mexican government provides a $1,550 subsidy for its citizens to be returned for burial; over the past five years, it has approved the transport of nearly 7,000 bodies or cremains. Adrián Félix, a professor of ethnic studies at UC Riverside, says the desire to be buried back home reveals that people still feel like outsiders in the US (*Los Angeles Times*, February 28).

RELIGIOUS LINK: The largest number of COVID-19 infections outside China is in South Korea, where more than 1,000 cases and 11 deaths have been confirmed. Half of those cases are tied to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, a group the government claims is a cult. The municipal government in Seoul has banned the group's services for the time being. Another cluster of cases is tied to a church in a southern part of the country, and the virus also infected some members of the Myungsung megachurch in Seoul, which has 80,000 members (*Quartz*, February 26).

RESCINDED: Wheaton College has rescinded the title of professor emeritus from Gilbert Bilezikian after an investigation into the New Testament professor turned up allegations of "inappropriate and unprofessional conduct." The evangelical school reopened the investigation after leaders at Willow Creek Community Church made public credible allegations that Bilezikian engaged in inappropriate behavior with a member of the suburban Chicago megachurch between 1984 and 1988. Bilezikian, known as "Dr. B," was never on staff at Willow Creek, but he was a mentor to its founding pastor, Bill Hybels. Bilezikian denies the allegations (RNS, February 28).

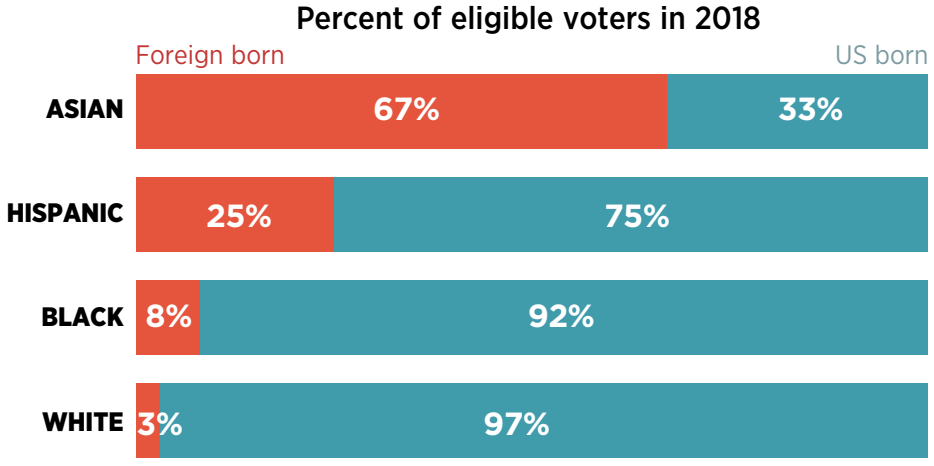
> "Many white Americans continue to turn a blind eye to racial injustice. We've settled for superficial healing at best and lies at worst. We are a wounded people—wounded especially by white supremacy. Our wound has been ignored and covered over. And it continues to fester."
>
> — **Laura Mayo**, senior minister of Covenant Church in Houston, on the failure of Americans to face up to white supremacy (Baptist News Global, February 21)

> "When good men and women can't speak the truth, when facts are inconvenient, when integrity and character no longer matter, when presidential ego and self-preservation are more important than national security—then there is nothing left to stop the triumph of evil."
>
> — **William H. McRaven**, a retired navy admiral, on the White House's dismissal of Joe Maguire, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, for his willingness to testify in the Ukraine whistleblower affair (*Washington Post*, February 21)

FOR GOD AND PEOPLE: The priest, poet, and liberation theology supporter Ernesto Cardenal passed away last month in Nicaragua from heart and kidney problems. Born into an influential family, he purchased a Solentiname island with family money after he was ordained in 1965 and started a Christian community. An early supporter of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, in 1984 Cardenal was sanctioned by Pope John Paul II and expelled from the priesthood. He became a strong critic of President Daniel Ortega. "Surrender to God led me to surrender to the people," he said of what he called his revolutionary vocation (Reuters, March 1).

VOTERS BY BIRTHPLACE

SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER



Why my mother's remains are still in my closet

The ashes will wait

by Heidi Haverkamp

THERE'S NO RUSH about ashes—they don't rot or stink. And so, like many people, I have an urn of ashes in my house. My mother died three years ago, and her ashes are in my closet. They're inside a thick plastic bag, cinched with a zip tie, wrapped in an unbleached linen table runner, and set in a fat glass vase. The certificate of cremation is smooshed at the bottom, kelly green ink on cream-colored paper inside a shiny envelope, with her full name printed on the front in a typewriter font. Two crosses of folded palm leaves from a long-ago Palm Sunday service are tucked in the folds of the linen.

This is my attempt at a solemn burial, for now.

My father, my brother, and I have been meaning to scatter my mother's ashes at her favorite beach in western Michigan, but we can't seem to get around to it. Two years ago, we were all on deck to vacation there for a whole week—but my brother, in the midst of packing up two kids and all their beach stuff, forgot to pack the ashes, which were in his basement that year. Since then, between busy schedules, bad weather, and a two-to-four-hour drive from our various homes, we haven't been able to arrange to all be there at the same time.

The ashes will wait. Still, my dad regularly sighs to me over the phone: "We really need to scatter those ashes."

Cremains are, in fact, not ashes at all but bone. When a body is burned for an hour or two at 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit, everything disintegrates except for a jumble of bone chunks. Those fragments are placed in a grinder and finely pulverized so they look clean and impersonal. (You can request that a crematory leave them as chunks, and I would have, if I had known.) They are easy to move or keep, whether you mean to or not. A friend of mine left her mother's ashes in the trunk of her car for months. Mom kept her parents' ashes in a closet until she was able to get on a plane and bury them in the churchyard of the Norwegian village where they were married. Her own ashes have been on circuit tour: Dad's closet, my bedroom, my closet, my brother's basement (next to his beer cooler), my bookcase, and now back in my closet.

I didn't realize what my mother's body really meant to me until she died.

My family and I have been meaning to scatter my mother's ashes, but we can't seem to get around to it.

I was 40 and she was 73. She'd collapsed in the middle of the night, for no reason the doctors could figure. When we were ready to take her off the ventilator, the nurses suggested we leave so we wouldn't have to watch them extubate her. We prayed over her, anointed her, and then went to stand in the hall. When we came back in, they'd cleaned up the blood and the tubes were gone, but so was she. She died, and we missed it.

Walking away was confusing. Later, I wished we were Jewish or Muslim, that there was some custom that would've invited us to linger: to undress, wash, and tend her body ourselves. But my family is a motley combination of Protestant, secular, and unsentimental, so we staggered down the wide hallway, leaving her body behind. Later, hospital staff would wheel it to the morgue, where, according to the cremation invoice, it stayed for three days before a stranger came to pick it up and drive it down the interstate to the crematory.

The day after she died, Dad and I walked a half mile in the July heat to the cremation society office in his Chicago neighborhood. We sat in shabby chairs in the small storefront as the front door, opening and closing, almost brushed our knees. The assistant assigned to us, disorganized but kind, explained the process and showed us how to fill out the forms. Dad signed papers and paid with a credit card.

Dozens of urns crowded the shelves on the wall: metal, wood, ceramic, glass, and a chalky plaster that would dissolve in salt or fresh water. Some were shaped like an angel, a dolphin, a golf bag, or a heart. My dad is cheap as a flea, so paying $1,500 or even $80 for one of these "pieces of junk" was out of the question. Nevertheless, the assistant explained, they could not deliver the ashes to us without a container. We went over to the kitchen store across the street and found a tall, clear plastic canister with a vacuum seal lid, meant for flour or pasta, for $20. The assistant accepted it without

comment and put a sticker on the bottom with my mother's name and a bar code.

"Can we attend the cremation?" I asked. I was a parish priest at that time, so I knew this was possible, but neither the clerk nor the literature had mentioned it.

Dad looked at me, quizzically. "What? No, Heidi."

Why did I want this? To stand behind a plateglass window, in a suburban industrial complex somewhere, looking from a distance at large machinery so I could see someone else put a cardboard box into a steel box and then flip a switch?

But I asked again: "Isn't there a way we be there," I stumbled, "when they cremate her?"

There's an Episcopal prayer service for use at a crematory, not that any family I'd pastored ever wanted to be present for one. But I did. I wanted to say out loud: "As her body is changed back to the energies and elements of the earth from which it came, may she return to you to be clothed in a shining resurrection body."

Yes, the assistant replied, but the facility was almost an hour away and it would cost an additional $400.

The ashes were delivered to the storefront office, in the plastic canister from the kitchen store. Dad picked them up. When I asked what he had done with them, he told me they were in a hall closet.

"I don't want to see them or think about them," he said, "I just want to think about Mom."

A few days later, I came to his apartment to pick him up for a family trip. While he was doing something else, I went to the closet, took the bag of ashes from the canister—it was heavy—swaddled it in a towel, and slipped it into my backpack. Dad wouldn't have forbidden this, but he would've thought it was silly. And I wanted to feel the weight of her with us, against the small of my back—like a sandbag against a flood, like a memorial to lift and lower, maneuver, shoulder.

A week later, without mentioning that I'd had them all along, I asked him if I could take them.

PHOTO © AZERBERBER / ISTOCK / GETTY

He shrugged: "I don't have any interest in them."

A couple of weeks later, I brought the ashes in a tote bag to the memorial service, which was at my parents' church. I purchased a glass vase, an upgrade from the pasta canister, and a table runner to wrap around the plastic bag like a shroud. I didn't want to hide the ashes, but I also didn't think anyone else wanted to see them.

Unlike a coffin, an urn is small and is easy to miss, especially in a big church, and sometimes it's just as easy to leave it at home. There is no glimpse of a person—not even size and shape—in a box or vase of ashes. But for me, there was still a connection to her in these sandy crumbs of her bones. Still, putting them out in the middle of the church seemed maudlin and a little gross. So, I set the vase behind a large photo we'd displayed. My nephew helped me place a rose there before the opening song.

We had talked about driving the two hours to the beach the next day, so that family visiting from out of town could scatter Mom's ashes with us if they wanted. But my dad and brother didn't want to make the drive after such an exhausting day. After the service and reception were over, I put the vase and the ashes back in the tote bag and took them home.

Four years later, we're still planning to scatter her ashes. Maybe we'll find a weekend next spring or summer when we're all free. Maybe my brother's kids and other family members will join us. Hopefully I won't forget the ashes. Somehow, we'll know it's the right time and we'll walk down to the beach. My brother and I will go barefoot, and my dad will wear his beat-up nylon sandals. We'll cut open the zip tie around the heavy plastic bag and scatter the bone bits in handfuls, downwind. No one will want to say much, except me. I'll say the words I've said for so many other families, this time for my mother, my family, and myself:

> We are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. For so did you ordain when you created me, saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. CC

Heidi Haverkamp is an Episcopal priest, speaker, and author of Holy Solitude: Lenten Reflections with Saints, Hermits, Prophets, and Rebels.

Report finds late L'Arche founder was serially abusive

A respected Catholic figure who worked to improve conditions for people with developmental disabilities for more than half a century sexually abused at least six women during most of that period, according to a report released February 22 by the organization he founded, based in France.

The report produced for L'Arche International said the women's descriptions provided enough evidence to show that Jean Vanier engaged in "manipulative sexual relationships" from 1970 to 2005, usually with a "psychological hold" over the alleged victims.

Although he was a layperson and not a priest, many Catholics hailed Vanier, who was Canadian, as a living saint. He died last year at age 90.

"The alleged victims felt deprived of their free will and so the sexual activity was coerced or took place under coercive conditions," the report, commissioned by L'Arche last year and prepared by UK-based GCPS Consulting, said. It did not rule out potential other victims.

None of the women was disabled. The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements, however, have forced a recognition that power imbalances such as those in spiritual relationships can breed abuse.

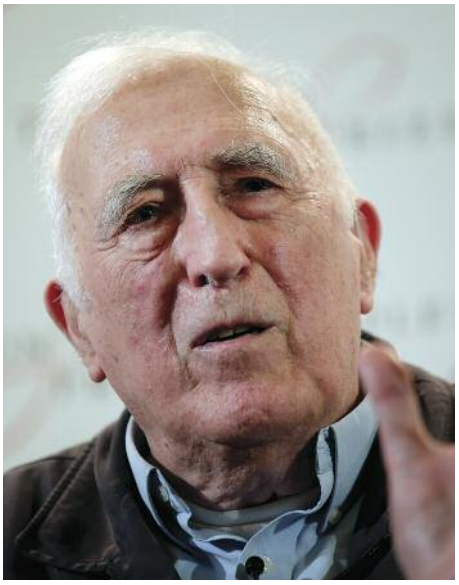
As part of the L'Arche-commissioned inquiry, six adult women without links to each other said Vanier engaged in sexual relations with them, often in the context of spiritual accompaniment.

The women reported similar facts, and Vanier's sexual misconduct was often associated with alleged "spiritual and mystical justifications," the report states.

A statement released by L'Arche France stressed that some women still have "deep wounds."

The report noted similarities with the pattern of abuse by Thomas Philippe, a Catholic priest Vanier called his "spiritual father." Philippe, who died in 1993, has been accused of sexual abuse by several women.

A statement from L'Arche International said analysis of archives shows that Vanier "adopted some of Father Thomas Philippe's deviant theories and practices." Philippe was banned from exercising any public or private ministry in a trial led by the Catholic Church in 1956 for his theories and the sexual practices that stemmed from them.



AP PHOTO / LEFTERIS PITARAKIS

SEXUAL ABUSE: An independent inquiry revealed in February that L'Arche founder Jean Vanier, a respected Canadian religious figure, sexually abused at least six women.

In a letter to L'Arche members, L'Arche International leaders Stephan Posner and Stacy Cates-Carney told of their shock at the news and condemned Vanier's actions.

"For many of us, Jean was one of the people we loved and respected the most. . . . While the considerable good he did throughout his life is not in question, we will nevertheless have to mourn a certain image we may have had of Jean and of the origins of L'Arche," they wrote.

Other devoted fans and Catholic commentators voiced deep disappointment at the findings. Some held up the case as a reason to bring long waits back to the saint-making process, to make sure candidates for canonization hold up to scrutiny long after death.

JD Flynn, the editor in chief of Catholic News Agency, said the report's conclusions hit his family particularly hard: Flynn has two children with Down syndrome, one of whom is named for Vanier.

"This is devastating for our family," he tweeted. "Please pray for us, and also for L'Arche."

John Gehring, program director at the US advocacy network Faith in Public Life, said Vanier attracted so many devotees because he was a "quiet refugee from that chaos" of the institutional Catholic Church.

"Part of why the Vanier news is so gutting, I think, is that he offered an authentic path into deep spirituality for many detached from the institutional church and disillusioned with clerical leaders who abused power," he tweeted. "The truth is painful."

Vanier worked as a Canadian navy officer and professor before turning to charity work. A visit to a psychiatric facility prompted him to found L'Arche in 1964 as an alternative living environment where people with developmental disabilities could be participants in their community instead of patients.

L'Arche is now a federation of com-

munities in 38 countries that are home to thousands of people, both with and without disabilities.

Vanier, who was unmarried, also traveled the world to encourage dialogue across religions and was awarded the 2015 Templeton Prize for spiritual work, as well as France's Legion of Honor. He was the subject of a documentary shown at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival called *Jean Vanier: The Sacrament of Tenderness*." —Sylvie Corbet, Associated Press. Nicole Winfield contributed to this story from Rome.

Death toll rises in Delhi anti-Muslim riots

AP PHOTO

MOB VIOLENCE: A shop burns in New Delhi, India, on February 25. At least ten people were killed in two days of clashes that cast a shadow over US president Donald Trump's visit to the country.

At least 24 people were killed and 189 injured in three days of clashes in New Delhi that coincided with President Donald Trump's first state visit to India, with the death toll expected to rise as hospitals continue to take in the wounded, authorities said February 26.

Shops, Muslim shrines, and public vehicles were left smoldering from violence between Hindu mobs and Muslims protesting a new citizenship law that fast-tracks naturalization for foreign-born religious minorities of all major faiths in South Asia except Islam.

The clashes were the worst communal riots in the Indian capital in decades. The law's passage in December earlier spurred massive protests across India that left 23 dead, many of them killed by police.

The dead included a policeman and an intelligence bureau officer. The government has banned public assembly in the affected areas.

National Security Adviser Ajit Doval toured the northeastern neighborhoods of Delhi where the rioting occurred, seeking to assure fear-stricken residents, including a female student who complained that police had not protected them from mobs who vandalized the area and set shops and vehicles on fire.

While clashes wracked parts of the capital, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted a lavish reception for Trump, including a rally in Modi's home state of Gujarat attended by more than 100,000 people and the signing of an agreement to purchase more than $3 billion worth of American military hardware.

On February 26, Modi broke his silence on the violence, tweeting that "peace and harmony are central to [India's] ethos. I appeal to my sisters and brothers of Delhi to maintain peace and brotherhood at all times."

New Delhi's High Court ordered the police to review videos of hate speeches allegedly made by three leaders of Modi's party and decide whether to prosecute them, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

The clashes escalated on February 25, according to Rouf Khan, a resident of Mustafabad, an area in the capital's northeast.

Khan said mobs with iron rods, bricks, and bamboo sticks attacked the homes of Muslims while chanting "Jai Shri Ram," or "Victory to Lord Ram," the

AP PHOTO / ALTAF QADRI

ON PATROL: Indian security officers in New Delhi, India, on February 26. Clashes recently escalated between Hindu mobs and Muslims protesting a new citizenship law that fast-tracks naturalization for foreign-born religious minorities of all major faiths in South Asia except Islam.

popular Hindu god of the religious epic Ramayana.

As Air Force One flew Trump and his delegation out of New Delhi, Muslim families huddled in a mosque in the city's northeast, praying that Hindu mobs wouldn't burn it down.

"After forcing their way inside the homes, they went on a rampage and started beating people and breaking household items," Khan said of the mobs, adding that he and his family had to run and take shelter inside a mosque that he said was guarded by thousands of Muslim men.

"I don't know if our house was burned or not, but when we were running away we heard them asking people to pour kerosene and burn everything down," Khan said.

Some of the dead had bullet wounds, according to Sunil Kumar, medical director of the Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital.

Others came to the hospital with gunshot and stab wounds and head injuries.

Among them was Mohammad Sameer, 17, who was being treated for a gunshot wound to his chest.

Speaking to the Associated Press after having an operation, Sameer said he was standing on his family's apartment terrace watching Hindu mobs enter Mustafabad when he was shot in the chest.

"When Sameer was shot, I took him on my shoulders and ran downstairs," said the boy's father, Mohammad Akram. "But when the mob saw us, they beat me and my injured son. He was bleeding very badly. While they were beating with sticks, they kept on chanting 'Jai Shri Ram' slogans and threatened to barge inside our homes."

Akram said he managed to get his son into a vehicle, but they were stopped several times by Hindus demanding they pull their pants down to show whether they were circumcised before they managed to escape from the area and reach the emergency room. Muslims are generally circumcised, while Hindus are not.

The violence drew sharp reactions from US lawmakers, with Rep. Rashida Tlaib, a Democrat from Michigan, tweeting, "This week, Trump visited India but the real story should be the communal violence targeting Muslims in Delhi right now."

Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan condemned the killing of Muslims, saying: "Now 200 million Muslims in India are being targeted. The world community must act now."

Trump told reporters that he had heard about the violence but had not discussed it with Modi. Instead, Trump gloated about his reception in India.

India has been rocked by violence since Parliament approved the citizenship law in December. Opponents have said the country is moving toward a religious citizenship test, but Trump declined to comment on it.

"I don't want to discuss that. I want to leave that to India and hopefully they're going to make the right decision for the people," he said. —Sheikh Saaliq and Emily Schmall, Associated Press. Ashok Sharma and Shonal Ganguly in New Delhi, and Munir Ahmed in Islamabad, Pakistan, contributed to this report.

Theological e-Academy is 'game changer' in East Africa

United Methodist theological colleges in East Africa now can deliver education at a distance.

A new United Methodist e-Academy was launched in December in Kenya after a week of training for leaders of four United Methodist East African theological colleges.

The goal of the program, which was funded by Cliff College in Sheffield, England, and the Endowment Fund for Theological Education in the Central Conferences, is to equip people for ordained and lay leadership in rural communities.

Boniface Ghero, lecturer at Wesley College in Tanzania, said the program is a blended version of e-learning that is enabling a fully electronic relationship between lecturers and students.

"It's a game changer for theological education in East Africa," Ghero said. "What distance education has done is to certify lay people for congregational leadership in vast rural areas in East Africa that have suffered severe shortages of ordained clergy," he said.

The academy, named Pamoja, allows students to follow lectures online, interact with teachers, submit assignments, and check grades, while lecturers can upload course materials, post assignments, and generate discussions using online blogs. Cliff College's TheologyX

UNITED METHODIST NEWS / GAD MAIGA

ELECTRONIC THEOLOGICAL ED: Danson Maganga from Tanzania takes notes during a United Methodist e-Academy weeklong training session in Nairobi, Kenya. The goal of the new program is to equip people for ordained and lay leadership in rural communities.

online learning platform will host the Pamoja network.

Wilton T. Odongo, coordinator of Pamoja and dean of Wesleyan United Methodist Bible College in Nairobi, said the academy has great potential to expand participation and increase enrollment at United Methodist theological schools.

Gene Ramsey, a retired pastor from the Illinois Great Rivers Conference living in Uganda, said that the e-learning program has significantly resourced the leadership of the conference's theological college to offer classes to those who aren't able to study on campus.

"We can design courses specifically targeting the needs of our pastors—or even the lay leadership who works alongside them and often become our next generation of pastors—and offer them courses in Bible, liturgy, a United Methodist understanding of the sacraments, or Wesleyan theology as needed," he said.

Ramsey said local church pastors are tentmakers who, in addition to caring for congregations, have to work outside the church to support their families. They have neither the financial resources nor the time to pursue a theological degree at a distant campus.

Mercy Rehema, a lecturer at Wesleyan United Methodist Bible College and an alumna of Africa University, a United Methodist–related institution, said the online teaching environment has changed the social dynamics of the class.

"It is now possible to design online learning to leverage the differences that exist between students, by intentionally creating diverse working groups within a course," she said.

She singled out the e-learning program as an opportunity for voices that are seldom heard in the classroom—because of disability, temperament, or perceived marginalization—to be present online.

Rehema noted the need for scholarships for distance learners in East Africa and Africa as a whole. "Together, we can contribute toward theological education advancement for the church in East Africa." —Gad Maiga, United Methodist News Service

Bernie Sanders visits prominent black church before Super Tuesday

In a visit to one of North Carolina's most prominent African American churches, Sen. Bernie Sanders scored big points talking about poverty in the United States.

The front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination spoke on February 26 with William J. Barber II at Greenleaf Christian Church, where Barber is senior pastor. The talk came ahead of Super Tuesday, when a significant segment of black voters cast their votes—including in North Carolina, where African Americans make up 22 percent of the state's residents.

Asked by Barber to introduce himself, Sanders spoke of his modest roots as the son of a poor Polish immigrant growing up in a rent-controlled apartment in Brooklyn.

He spoke of how important it is for poor people to speak up about their lack of health care or retirement savings.

He spoke of the stress that poor people experience as a result of not being able to provide for their families and how that stress can impact their health.

And he spoke about the need to raise the minimum wage, allow workers to unionize, and ensure that women are paid the same wages as men.

"What we have got to do is not apologize for the speed in which we want to transform this country," Sanders said.

But on the critical issue of race, Sanders spoke more generally, without addressing historic inequities.

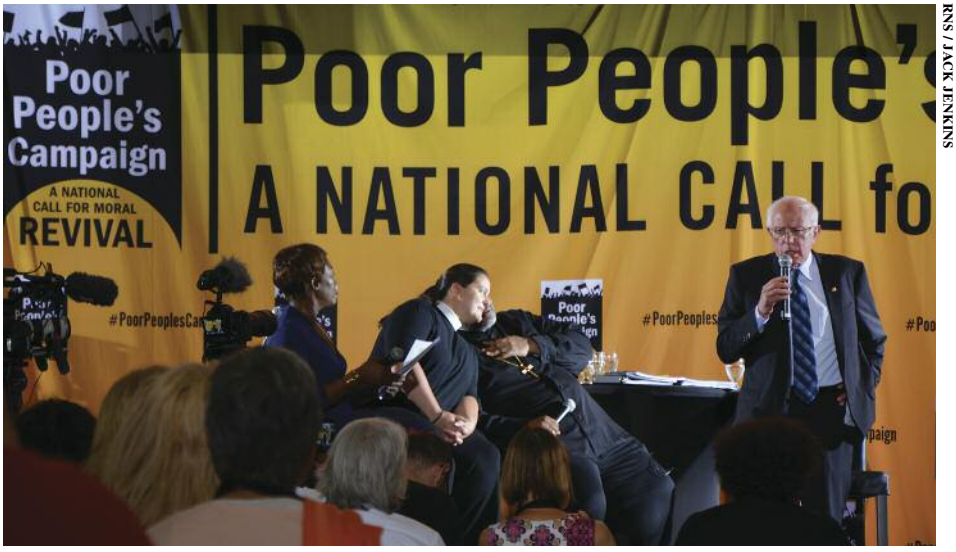
Asked by Barber how Sanders would address systemic racism, especially as it relates to voter suppression and racialized gerrymandering, Sanders didn't offer solutions to target racial injustices.

"The bottom line is, if you are 18 years of age and a citizen of the United States of America, you have a right to vote," Sanders said.

Barber went on to press Sanders. Barber talked about the 2013 Supreme Court ruling that gutted a key provision of the Voting Rights Act, as well as various North Carolina legislative efforts to require voter ID, limit early voting, and gerrymander legislative districts—all efforts that courts have found were intended to disempower African Americans and maximize Republicans' advantage.

Sanders repeated a pledge to expand the vote. And he won applause for saying he would support making Election Day a federal holiday.

Sanders is the third presidential hopeful to speak at Barber's church this election cycle as part of a series of events organized by the Poor People's Campaign, a national movement to lift up issues affecting the poor, which Barber cochairs.



RNS / JACK JENKINS

CHURCH VISIT: Sen. Bernie Sanders speaks at a Poor People's Campaign event in Washington, D.C., in 2019. Last month, he participated in a forum that spotlighted poverty, hosted by William Barber at Greenleaf Christian Church, in Goldsboro, North Carolina.

Former South Bend mayor Pete Buttigieg and California activist billionaire Tom Steyer have previously visited the church. (Both have since dropped out of the race.)

The sanctuary and several overflow rooms were packed with activists from the Poor People's Campaign, Sanders supporters, and Democrats eager to get a glimpse of the front-runner ahead of the March 3 Super Tuesday vote. Not all were persuaded by Sanders.

"I'm not sure he has a full appreciation for systematic racism," said Anne Baird Wells, a retired NAACP volunteer who lives in Moore County near the town of Pinehurst. "You have to spend enough time with people who have experienced it to fully grasp it. I didn't get the sense he truly grasped it."

Many supporters with "Bernie" T-shirts and buttons attended the conversation at Barber's church and thought he spoke clearly and effectively.

Among them was Keith Cooper of Greenville, North Carolina, president of the Eastern North Carolina Regional Association of Black Social Workers.

"I believe in his very progressive agenda," said Cooper. "That progressive agenda is very reminiscent of the New Deal agenda of Franklin Roosevelt of the 1930s. Sanders reminds me a lot of that."

The next day, Sanders held a rally at Winston-Salem State University, a historically black university in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, before heading back down to South Carolina. —Yonat Shimron, Religion News Service

AP PHOTO / MARK TENALLY

FOSTER CARE DISPUTE: On February 24 the Supreme Court said it will review an appeals court ruling that upheld the city of Philadelphia's decision to stop placing foster children with Catholic Social Services because the agency would not permit same-sex couples to serve as foster parents.

Supreme Court to hear dispute between Catholic nonprofit, same-sex foster parents

On February 24, the Supreme Court said it will hear a dispute over a Philadelphia Catholic agency that won't place foster children with same-sex couples, a big test of religious rights under a more conservative court.

The justices will review an appeals court ruling that upheld the city's decision to stop placing children with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's agency because it would not permit same-sex couples to serve as foster parents.

The Third US Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia ruled the city did not target the agency, Catholic Social Services, because of its religious beliefs but acted only to enforce its own nondiscrimination policy in the face of what seemed to be a clear violation.

The case will not be argued until fall.

Among the issues the justices will take up is whether to overrule a 30-year-old Supreme Court decision that does not allow for religious exemptions from laws that apply generally and neutrally to everyone. The federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act, approved by Congress to counteract that court ruling, does not apply to state and local government action.

With the addition of two appointees of President Donald Trump, Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, the court seems poised to extend protections for religious objections to antidiscrimination laws.

Both sides framed the case in terms of children who need homes.

"I'm relieved to hear that the Supreme Court will weigh in on faith-based adoption and foster care. Over the last few years, agencies have been closing their doors across the country, and all the while children are pouring into the system. We are confident that the Court will realize that the best solution is the one that has worked in Philadelphia for a century—all hands on deck for foster kids," said Lori Windham, senior counsel at Becket, the law firm representing a foster mother who has worked with the Catholic agency for more than 25 years.

Marcel S. Pratt, the Philadelphia solicitor, had urged the court to leave the appellate ruling in place. "This case is ultimately about serving the youth in our care, and the best way to do that is by upholding our sincere commitment to the dignity of all people, including our LGBTQ community," Pratt said.

Catholic Social Services won't certify same-sex married couples because of religious principles, and it also doesn't allow unmarried couples who live together to foster children under its program.

The agency had worked with the city for years, but its policy only came to the city's attention in March 2018, when a reporter with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* asked about it, the appeals court said.

The *Inquirer* reported that Catholic Social Services placed about 260 kids in 2017. Philadelphia has contracts with more than two dozen agencies that help find foster homes for about 5,000 children, a city spokesman said. —Mark Sherman, Associated Press

People

RNS / YONAT SHIMRON

■ For nearly two years **Rosa del Carmen Ortez-Cruz** took sanctuary from deportation at the Church of Reconciliation, not knowing if she would ever be able to emerge from her confinement.

On February 26, a three-judge panel of the US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled that immigration authorities may not deport her. The unanimous ruling means Ortez-Cruz will be entitled to stay and work in the United States for the foreseeable future.

"I feel like there's been a weight lifted from on top of me," Ortez-Cruz told Religion News Service. "I still have some fear, but I feel more secure. Now I know if they come after me, they'd have to release me."

Ortez-Cruz fled Honduras for the United States in 2002, after her domestic partner, the father of her first child, stabbed her multiple times in the stomach. The Church of Reconciliation and the Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship—both meet in the same building—offered her refuge from immediate deportation two years ago.

Ortez-Cruz did not qualify for asylum because she waited too long after crossing the US border to file a claim. But she argued she cannot return to Honduras, since she fears her ex-partner may kill her. The court agreed, finding that the Board of Immigration Appeal erred by not providing any evidence that it would be safe for her to return to Honduras.

Nationwide, there are 47 undocumented immigrants who have publicly announced they are taking refuge in US religious congregations, according to Church World Service, which maintains a database.

Isaac Villegas, pastor of the Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship, said a total of 160 people from 11 congregations volunteered to help Ortez-Cruz during her nearly two-year confinement. A volunteer stayed at the church with her every night in case Immigration and Customs Enforcement came knocking. Others helped wash her laundry once a week (the church doesn't have a washing machine) and buy her groceries.

The two main churches also raised money to foot her legal bills.

"We've grown together," said Villegas. "She's part of our church life. We've come to share lives together. It will feel strange and probably empty to not have her here."

Ortez-Cruz said her biggest hardship was being away from her children who have been living with relatives in Greensboro, 55 miles away. She plans to stay in Chapel Hill and looks forward to bringing her family there.

Her one sadness is knowing that many others who have taken sanctuary in churches don't have any idea when they may be able to leave. In the 22 months she has been at the church, she formed close bonds with many of them.

"They're happy for me," she said. "But I can sense they're sad, too." —Yonat Shimron, Religion News Service

■ The Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee will launch a task force to examine the activities of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the convention's public policy organization headed by theologian and author **Russell Moore**.

RNS / BUTCH DILL

Southern Baptist leaders fear controversy over Moore could lead to a drop in donations.

Moore, 48, who has been president of the ERLC since 2013, has been an outspoken critic of Donald Trump since the president began campaigning for the White House. In 2016, Moore called Trump "an arrogant huckster" and wrote an essay for the *National Review* citing "Trump's vitriolic—and often racist and sexist—language about immigrants, women, the disabled and others."

The request for an inquiry came from the Cooperative Program Committee, an SBC body that deals with financial giving from churches to the convention's national ministries.

Mike Stone, chair of the Executive Committee, said in a news conference on February 18 that committee members have heard anecdotal accounts of churches withholding money or reducing giving because of concerns about the ERLC. He said that local church leaders and state Baptist leaders have expressed concerns in private but not on the record. The task force will give them a place to officially lodge their concerns.

Stone added that the Executive Committee does not know if concerns about the ERLC have indeed caused giving to drop. He also said that there is a lot of "fake news" about the convention and about the ERLC and that the task force will try to find the truth.

In early February, Baptist Press, the official news service of the SBC, reported that giving to the Cooperative Program was up about 3 percent from last year. Last year Baptists had given $64.5 million by the end of January. This year, giving totaled just under $66.5 million by the same point in the year.

Similar complaints were raised against ERLC in 2017 over Moore's anti-Trump comments. At that time, Moore met with Frank Page, the former president of the Executive Committee, and the two agreed to work together for the good of the convention.

Stone said the task force is not an attempt to remove Moore from office.

"I am fully aware that we may find, as we did in 2017, that what we're hearing is not as significant in fact as it is in perception," Stone said. "And what we want to find is just where the facts would lead us." —Bob Smietana, Religion News Service

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March 29, Fifth Sunday in Lent
John 11:1–45

THE RAISING OF LAZARUS is a big story with oversized themes. There's love and pain, doubt and faith, death and resurrection. The story prepares us for Holy Week by preparing us to deal with grief.

Grief is complicated. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's famous stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—were intended to describe the emotions of the dying. While these stages might be applied to anyone experiencing loss, each person grieves in their own way, repeating or skipping steps along the way. There is no typical way to grieve, just as there is no typical loss.

Certainly the loss of Lazarus is not typical—not for his sisters, and not for his friend Jesus. John uses the word *love* three times to describe the depth of Jesus' relationship with Lazarus. John does not describe what is at stake for the sisters, and perhaps he does not need to do so. Siblings are our oldest friends and our first enemies, holders of our history and bearers of our future. In Mary and Martha's context, Lazarus might be even more important. No husband, father, or son appears in the sisters' story. Scholars posit that Lazarus filled the role of patriarch, holding the family property and providing for his sisters' maintenance. There's no telling what might happen should Mary and Martha lose their protector.

The stakes are high when Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus that Lazarus is ill. When Jesus delays, John rationalizes the choice: Jesus knows where this story will end, sees in it a means to God's glory and an opportunity to deepen the disciples' faith. But we who know grief can't help but wonder. Is this Jesus' own moment of denial? Who among us wants to admit that those we love are mortal? Is John perhaps using Jesus' voice to rationalize pain too great to understand?

In any case, Jesus arrives too late. Lazarus isn't just sleeping, as the disciples suppose. Jesus' labored retort to them seems almost angry. They've been with "the light of the world" all this time, yet they still do not see. But the disciples' misunderstanding isn't the worst of what Jesus will face in this chapter. When Lazarus's sisters hear that Jesus has finally arrived, their grief comes at him from all directions.

If Jesus had come in time, Martha bargains when she goes to meet him, perhaps her brother would not have died. She adds that she knows God will still give Jesus whatever he asks, but her proclamation rings hollow. Martha responds to Jesus' promise of resurrection life with a vague and depressing affirmation: these things will be "on the last day." She can't hold up much hope for now.

By contrast, Mary perhaps is too angry at first to meet Jesus face to face. She stays behind, at home, waiting for him to come to her. Only at the private urging of her sister, only after Jesus asks for her specifically, does Mary come to meet him. When she does, Mary offers the same bargaining accusation her sister used: Jesus could have prevented this tragedy, but it's too late now. Her depression spills over into tears.

Jesus himself has no clever retort. He asks to see the grave, and then he weeps, too.

This shortest of Bible verses generates much ink. John has made it plain that Jesus knows Lazarus will be raised, so why would he weep? Some scholars suggest that he regrets bringing Lazarus back to a fallen world. Eastern Orthodox tradition holds that Lazarus never smiled after his resurrection: having witnessed souls languishing in hell, he can never feel joy again. Others surmise that Jesus weeps because Lazarus will need to die again as a martyr.

Our modern understanding of grief opens other possibilities. Jesus' grief is not a denial of God's power but the ultimate admission of God's love—for Lazarus, for Mary and Martha, and for his own life, so soon to be taken. John writes that God's love for the world is realized through Jesus embracing rather than rejecting humanity. We only come to know God through this divine act of grace. Maybe that's why "Jesus wept" is better remembered than John's heady descriptions of his motives. It means something to us that Jesus is deeply moved, that he feels the way we do. It means something that Jesus grieves as we do, that he too will walk grief's stages. New possibilities are opened if we suppose Jesus grieves as he goes to the cross. We can imagine a God who grieves when we suffer and who will not rest until all are redeemed.

This study of grief is not without recourse. We do not grieve as those who do not have hope. Christians always read the story of the passion with the knowledge of the resurrection. We read the stories of our world, of those we love, and of ourselves knowing that something more awaits. The raising of Lazarus is not just a foretaste of the feast to come but a real and tangible sign: resurrection is not just for "the last day" but also for now.

We can expect that God will call us out of tombs. We can anticipate being called to unbind those long thought dead. Having seen the resurrection of Lazarus, alongside other resurrections in our lives and in our world, we can, like Mary, dare to believe.

This is a story of grief and also hope. We need not fear our own emotional journeys during Lent and during our lives. A fully human Jesus affirms our humanity—meeting us on the road, calling to us at home, insisting that the stones that bar our tombs be taken away. He weeps with us, and he calls us to life anew. Resurrection is only the beginning.

LIVING BY The Word

April 5, Liturgy of the Palms
Matthew 21:1–11

CHURCHES STILL HOLD Holy Week services, but attendance has dropped. Many worshipers don't attend between Palm Sunday and Easter—causing some church leaders to worry that the week can devolve into triumphalism, the parade at its beginning predictably leading to an empty tomb at its end. Many churches now shorten or even omit Palm Sunday celebrations, choosing instead to observe Passion Sunday.

While there is merit to hearing the whole story of Jesus' Passion on a single Sunday, Palm Sunday itself is more than just a happy parade. This triumphal entry of Jesus is not like the typical triumphal entries of empire, nor does it yield the same result. The careful preacher may, with the Palm Sunday story alone, lift up a dissonance present throughout Jesus' Passion, made complete at Easter dawn.

In their book *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan contrast Jesus' triumphal entry with Pontius Pilate's. A present-day audience has other examples of triumphal entries from empires closer to home. The Nazis entering Paris, the obligatory May Day parades in communist countries, North Korean military displays, and white nationalists' public rallies fit the same bill.

The trappings of these triumphal entries are well known. The latest in military machinery is on display, whether it be horses and chariots or missiles, tanks, and large-capacity rifles. The people respond with accolades, whether because they are paid in denarii and circus games or because they are threatened by their party leader and the secret police. The leader is an undisputed strongman. Whether he be Pilate or Caesar, Hitler or Kim Jong-un, his face—and it is always a *he*—is known throughout the land. He uses his parade to bolster his own power and position and that of a select ruling class. The religious establishment quickly falls in line. The triumphal entry displays the might of empire, simultaneously encouraging the few in power while frightening the masses into subservience.

Jesus does it all wrong. Instead of entering Jerusalem on a tank, Jesus uses a tractor. Matthew, perhaps misreading the poetry of the Septuagint, has Jesus ride into Jerusalem on not one but two animals, both a donkey and a colt. Neither an army nor the rich and famous accompany Jesus on his march. Instead his disciples, a ragtag group of fishermen, common folk, and at least one disreputable tax collector, make up the entourage.

The crowds themselves may not even be from Jerusalem. These are, perhaps, the very people Jesus healed and fed, country folk too desperate to wait at home for help and too poor to buy their own lunch. Waving palm branches and throwing down their cloaks, they make an unscripted celebration. There's no goose-stepping here, no coordinated show of gratitude with ribbons or cards. According to Matthew, the people of Jerusalem don't even know who Jesus is. There are no marble busts of this messiah, no propaganda posters or laudatory TV interviews. Jesus is an unknown.

Is it any wonder that later in this chapter, religious officials will question Jesus' authority, eventually seeking to have him arrested? The establishment fears Jesus and the masses shout his praise—it's a reversal of the whole point of a triumphal entry.

But Jesus isn't the only one. Matthew is keen to connect Jesus to Hebrew scripture. The quotation in our Gospel reading is an amalgamation of messianic prophecies from Isaiah and Zechariah. The king who would save Jerusalem comes not in a show of might but humbly. This image of the king on a donkey evokes other unlikely heroes of Judaism: younger sons, barren women, foreigners. Jesus' humility calls to mind his ancestor David, a shepherd boy who put all his trust in God and became king. The rise of ones like this is so unlikely it can only be interpreted as an act of God. The crowds cry out praise and bless the one who comes in God's name.

There are contemporary examples of these alternative triumphal entries, too. Martin Luther King Jr. led the people on foot to Washington, D.C. Mahatma Gandhi wore a lungi on the Salt March in India. Greta Thunberg, a mere teenager, stood before the UN with her hair in braids. The masked protesters continue their struggle in the streets of Hong Kong. They are joined by countless others around the world whose names and faces are not known by history. Suffragists seeking the vote, labor organizers demanding worker rights, indigenous people standing up for their native lands, schoolchildren protesting gun violence, women gathered to call for change. They follow in Jesus' path knowing full well that the accolades they hear can, and often do, devolve into mockery and violence.

After all, these alternative triumphal entries threaten the status quo. John the Baptist was martyred, as were most of Jesus' disciples. Gandhi and King were assassinated. Current protest leaders face ridicule and worse. While violence need not be inevitable, the Palm Sunday parade and all its successors boldly proclaim that humble heroes know the whole Passion story from start to finish and continue their work anyway.

Hosanna means "save us," and there are people who need to be saved even now, even if it costs something. There are some things that are worth dying for. "Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord." For those who do the work of God there are unexpected blessings: hope when all seems hopeless, peace beyond all understanding, love beyond measure, life beyond death.

In other words, the parade at the beginning does indeed lead to an empty tomb at the end. It's a different kind of triumphal entry, but one more lasting and more sure.

April 5, Liturgy of the Passion
Matthew 26:14–27:66

TRIALS MAKE compelling entertainment. We revere *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *12 Angry Men*. John Grisham's and James Patterson's names appear larger than their book titles. *Law and Order* ran 20 seasons and produced at least five spin-offs. There is something exhilarating about the control of violence, and something satisfying about its resolution. Nine times out of ten the bad guy gets his due and justice is served. Most well-heeled, white church members seem confident in our legal system, convinced that good generally overcomes evil.

The trial of Jesus might come as something of a shock.

Each Gospel writer tells the Passion of Christ in his own way. Matthew, more than the others, focuses on the trials. Twenty verses of this week's assigned reading elapse in and around Pilate's headquarters, the courthouse for Jesus' second trial. According to Matthew, the first trial takes place before the Sanhedrin, presided over by the high priest. This first trial included false witnesses, torture, and a desire for a death sentence—a verdict a Jewish court could not deliver. With trumped-up charges and biased judges, draconian methods and an outrageous sentence, a modern church audience knows what to expect in Jesus' appeal: Jesus should be exonerated, and all shall be well.

An ancient church might have known otherwise. While we don't know the identity of Matthew's intended audience, scholars make educated guesses. Matthew's heavy reliance on Jewish historical figures and frequent quotes from Hebrew scripture suggest Matthew writes to Christian descendants of a Jewish diaspora community living in or near Jerusalem—a community still under the thumb of Rome. Recent memories of Jerusalem's destruction serve as a reminder: antagonizing Rome has its price, a price an infant Christian community can ill afford to pay.

So perhaps we can excuse Matthew for his gentle treatment of Pilate. The Roman governor presides over the second trial and seems to go out of his way to free Jesus. First Pilate gives Jesus an opportunity to respond to the charges against him, but Jesus gives no answer. Pilate then offers to release Jesus. He makes the choice easy for the assembled crowd: they can have the "Jesus who is called the Messiah" or Jesus Barabbas, a "notorious prisoner." Matthew adds another incentive: Pilate knows Jesus is only on trial because of the religious authorities' jealousy.

Uniquely in Matthew's Gospel, Pilate's wife—like Joseph and the Magi before her—even receives a warning in a dream. Matthew gives the impression that if he had his druthers, Pilate would free Jesus. But events take matters out of his hands. The crowd cries out for Jesus' blood. Pilate washes his hands of Jesus' guilt as the crowds conveniently claim it for themselves.

The idea that the crowd is Jewish and thus Jews are to blame for Jesus' death has not been consigned to the dust of the Middle Ages or even to some bygone Nazi era. With increased attacks perpetrated against our Jewish neighbors, preachers must be explicit: anti-Semitism is antithetical to the gospel. The crowds are *our* spiritual forebears—their guilt is our own. We must admit the truth: we join the whole cast of characters who do nothing to stop injustice.

Jesus is flogged, mocked, and led away to Golgotha. There is no last-minute reprieve from Pilate or any other governor. Jesus will be crucified. The bystanders will find their entertainment. Soldiers gamble over Jesus' clothing. The chief priests, scribes, and elders mock his predicament. Even those crucified by Jesus' side join in the taunting. Others wait to offer him a sponge filled with wine, wondering whether Elijah will swoop in and save him.

But Jesus already knows the worst: God has forsaken him. God's own son—even the centurion knows—dies.

This isn't how we expect such a story to go. And yet, if we pay attention to history, if we listen to the voices of less privileged people, another truth becomes evident. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice memorializes 4,000 people lynched—often in daylight, in front of crowds, and at county courthouses. The Innocence Project has exonerated 367 people in its 19-year history, 21 of whom were on death row. The third season of Sarah Koenig's *Serial* podcast recounts the shocking normalcy of the biased and flawed processes of a typical midwestern courthouse. The recent film *Just Mercy*, based on the book of the same name, tells the story of Walter McMillan, an innocent man nearly sent to death, and the lawyer, Bryan Stevenson, who fought for his release.

Last January Bryan Alexander interviewed Stevenson for *USA Today*. When Stevenson first began representing wrongly convicted men in Mississippi, people would tell him he ought to visit the *To Kill a Mockingbird* museum. Stevenson told Alexander, "I had the same response every time: 'I'd love to, but I'm really busy freeing an innocent black man who has been wrongly convicted of a crime and facing execution' . . . the disconnect between romanticizing that story and indifference to injustice in a real wrongful conviction, that very much parallels my story."

The story of Jesus' unjust trial and wrongful conviction must not be romanticized. In Matthew's narrative we see not an anomaly, but the way the legal system often operates. Passion Sunday offers us an opportunity to leave behind our comfortable fictions, give up easy entertainment, and own our own role in perpetuating injustice. We are the guilty in this courtroom drama. But the blood on our hands, Jesus' blood, through the grace and power of God, will become the means to our salvation. We can dare to abandon our comforting fictions knowing that God's justice is greater, God's mercy truer, than our own.

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THE SCANDAL OF FOOT WASHING

A strange, humbling ritual

by Amy Frykholm

FROM THE EXPRESSION on the face of the priest at the Maundy Thursday service, I figured foot washing might be his least favorite activity of the church year. His face was wrinkled in what looked like disgust, as if he had just realized anew that this ritual involved actual feet.

When I approached the altar barefooted, as we had been instructed, he dabbed my feet lightly with a cloth before moving on to the next person in line. I returned to my seat and was surprised by the depth of my emotion. I felt dismayed, alienated, even distraught. I felt the priest's disgust, whether real or imagined, viscerally and personally. I vowed never to return to that church or to that priest.

I had been a stranger there and had wandered in on Maundy Thursday to connect with the traditions of Holy Week. Despite the fact that I had spent most of my life in nonliturgical churches, the idea of Lent and Holy Week had made an impression on me. That idea of a sacred time for reflection followed by a slow walk toward Easter had settled deep into me, and though I rarely went to church in those days I still sought church out during Holy Week, specifically looking for where I might get my feet washed or wash the feet of someone else.

Almost everyone has feet, yet feet have an uncanny quality. After decades now of being involved in foot washing, I have noticed that people frequently apologize for their feet, if they are willing to expose them at all. People tend to find their own feet unsightly: knobs, calluses, bunions, corns, misshapen toes, warts. Most of us keep our feet covered most of the time. To have our feet exposed, washed, even touched by a stranger in the context of church is an act of great vulnerability. It seems like a bad idea to many people. What was Jesus thinking?

I can understand why—despite Jesus' admonition in John 13 that his disciples wash one another's feet—some churches in recent years have substituted hand washing for foot washing. The participant is far less vulnerable. And many churches simply gloss over this admonition as though Jesus was speaking only metaphorically.

Whatever our objections to foot washing, Jesus' disciples voiced their own resistance. "You will never wash my feet!" Peter says to Jesus. I have seen dozens of people with this same reaction. Each person's reasoning may be different, but the assertion is the same. "Not my feet."

But Jesus has a powerful retort: "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me." These are strong words, suggesting that Jesus' command to wash one another's feet ranks pretty high in his list of commands, right up there with "Love one another." I've felt instinctively that Jesus' command does indeed involve actual feet and actual, not symbolic, washing. For us as much as for Peter, it is meant to be about a physical experience that provokes discomfort.

The history of the church does not necessarily confirm this instinct of mine. To me foot washing has a sacramental quality—a place where heaven meets earth, where the scandal of the incarnation is as vivid and present as it is in the Eucharist. But foot washing has never been a sacrament. In fact, church historians have found no instances in which the idea of foot washing as a sacrament was even considered.

John's Gospel is the only one to mention foot washing. The passage in John begins with the briefest mention of the supper that would become so central to the Christian tradition. Instead, the passage introduces foot washing via a declaration of Jesus' love in the context of the betrayal that will lead to his death. "And during supper, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself."

The presence of this story in this location in the Gospel has led some scholars to conclude that there was probably a communal foot washing ritual among early Christians. But Andrew McGowan, a scholar of early Christianity at Yale University, says that evidence for such an early tradition is scant to the point of nonexistent. Foot washing itself was common enough. Women and servants were frequently called upon to wash the feet of high-ranking men. But a specific communal practice that enacted a reversal of power, displaying Jesus' "humility and intimacy" as McGowan puts it, did not leave a mark on the historical record—except in this story in John.

McGowan suggests that the best context for understanding foot washing among first-century Christians is a practice that involved Christian women and prisoners. There is evidence that Christian women frequently went to prisons and other locations where marginal and disgraced individuals could be found and washed their feet. This practice was not highly regarded by those outside the Christian community and was criticized by some. It was considered improper and unseemly, especially since many of these women were not themselves poor or imprisoned.

To me foot washing has a sacramental quality. But it has never been a sacrament.

McGowan speculates that the story in John 13 may originate in an effort to "defend the awkwardness of women entering spaces outside the private sphere to undertake ritual washing."

Charitable foot washing disappears as a practice by the fourth century. Foot washing of another kind surfaces around the same time—as a somewhat controversial initiation rite among Christians. This rite was practiced in Milan under Bishop Ambrose. Arguments about whether clergy should or should not ritually wash the feet of the newly baptized suggest that the practice was observed at other places. This is the only known ritualization of the text in the early centuries of Christianity.

Another foot washing practice developed later in monasteries. In this ritual, foot washing was offered by brother to brother or abbot to brother. John Cassian describes a practice in which brothers who had done especially difficult or meaningful work on behalf of the monastery had their feet washed by other monks as a gesture of gratitude.

In the Middle Ages, monarchs and bishops and sometimes popes would choose subjects whose feet they would wash in public rituals. The current practice in the Catholic Church in which the pope chooses 12 people and gathers them for a Maundy Thursday ceremony in which he washes their feet has only been in place since the 1950s; it is a recent ritualization of the text of John 13, not the continuation of an ancient tradition.

After the Reformation, Protestants began to develop ritual practices of foot washing. Queen Elizabeth I washed the feet of poor women. The Moravians of the 16th century made foot

washing one of their central practices and have maintained it ever since. Moravian scholar Craig Atwood writes that foot washing is one of the practices whose "primary purpose was to strengthen the ties among members of the community." Foot washing was performed only in same-sex groups and sometimes only the leader did the washing. At other times, all members washed each other's feet. Atwood writes that the rite, called the *pedalavium*, was for the Moravians "an invisible grace, akin to a sacrament, in which the Watchers (or angels) participate."

After the Second Vatican Council, foot washing was revived as part of the liturgical renewal in Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Anglican and Episcopal churches. It came to be included as an option in official worship books. Lutheran liturgist Frank Senn urges Protestants to include foot washing in their contemporary ministry because it "encourages bodily engagement in liturgy," which was precisely the point of liturgical renewal.

Psalmic

I wake up to moon and stars still gleaming
in the predawn sky, and think, who cares
about someone else's inscrutable dream?
I'll insist, like everybody,
Mine is different. Listen.

A great white bird—a swan, perhaps,
or egret—hard to tell, so blinding
bright its splendid plumage—stood
in our kitchen citing Scripture.
To think of its words now takes me

back to school days, and to certain subjects
strange to me as springbok or lemur—
physics, chemistry, what have you—
poor teachers prosing on
to my utter bewilderment.

The great bird quoted the Wisdom Psalm:
Quicken me, by thy loving-kindness.
Oh, I've known loving-kindness, all right,
lifelong, from family and friends
and wife. But as I near 80,

I'm still surprised that some aren't quickened
by love, by kindness, by *any* virtue.
The news is blaring as I brush my teeth
of Big Pharma czars who bribed
doctors to prescribe their drugs.

Now thousands have died, with more to come.
You must hate the sin, I've been admonished,
not the sinner. And yet I believe I'd relish
watching those felons hanged.
I'd happily watch their eyes pop.

What am I saying? What must I be?
Did the great bird answer by way of Psalm 8?
When I consider thy heavens, the work
of thy fingers, the moon and the stars,
which thou hast ordained, then what

is man that thou art mindful of him?

Sydney Lea

My church walks an odd line between a ritual foot washing and a pedicure.

Groups like L'Arche, a ministry with people of different intellectual abilities, have incorporated foot washing as a way of expressing common humanity and humility as they build Christian community. Other ministries imitate the charitable foot washing practices of the first century by washing and tending to the feet of homeless people. Foot washing is fairly widespread in Christian life today, varying in frequency and in how the practice is actually carried out.

I did not know any of this history when I was looking to join a church community. But I knew it had to be a church with a robust practice of foot washing. There could be no dabbing, no looks of disgust, no wishing that the practice would go away. I needed a lived theology of foot washing.

That's what I found at St. George Episcopal Church in Leadville, Colorado. On Maundy Thursday, we encourage people to leave their shoes at the door. We carry big tubs of warm water into the sanctuary. In washing feet we use handmade soaps, and we offer to apply lotion at the end. We walk an odd line between a ritual foot washing and a pedicure. Foot washing is essential to our theology of hospitality and incarnation; it is a concrete way that we live out our mission to "seek and serve Christ in all persons."

Very often the offer of foot washing is refused. People don't want to have their feet washed because it's awkward, it's weird, and it makes the recipient feel vulnerable. But when people do accept the task of washing one another's feet, a strange and beautiful magic unfolds.

Take the story of Brian. Brian arrived for his first Maundy Thursday service straight from the woods, where he had been camping for the better part of the winter. He was hungry and dirty and quite anxious about how his feet and his whole body would be received. He apologized as he sat next to me at the meal that we had spread out in the sanctuary, but he ate gratefully.

After supper, he said no to the foot washing but sat on the side to watch the proceedings. He became intrigued and decided that foot washing might actually feel pretty good on his tired and aching feet.

That day began Brian's life in the community. He became a regular volunteer at the community meal the church serves. He became the person to grab the church laundry and bring it back clean. He made food deliveries. His life began to echo Jesus' words in John 13, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." The knowing began with warm water and a personal risk, and it grew from there.

Foot washing at St. George retains, after all of these centuries, a hint of scandal. One year, a homeless man named Kenny joined us for all of the rituals of Holy Week. Even though he was still drinking heavily (and would soon die of liver failure), he had started to attend church with a quality of faithfulness that was no longer about his seeking our help.

At the foot washing, he ended up seated next to the priest's tiny sprite of a daughter, who was about five years old. I felt some anxiety when I saw it, for it meant that as we went around the circle, with each person washing the feet of the person next to them, Lara would wash Kenny's feet. I worried for them both. Would she refuse to wash Kenny's feet? That would be completely understandable, but potentially humiliating for Kenny. Would he refuse to have his feet washed? That had happened so often I could almost anticipate it, but Lara would probably misunderstand it.

But when it was Lara's turn, she knelt down at Kenny's feet as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She lifted Kenny's feet into the basin of warm water, put soap on her hands, and washed his feet. Kenny laughed nervously and then began to cry. Then everyone began to cry, except Lara, who continued her work in a businesslike manner with deliberate movements. She spread lotion on his feet with interest and attention, as if painting with finger paints.

Each year, foot washing produces a new strangeness, and the children perceive this more than anyone. One year, a child decided to go into the kitchen and get her own basin and her own stack of towels. Everyone got two foot washings that year. Another year, children crawled around on the floor sniffing everyone's feet and giggling. Another year, my son came home from foot washing and announced that he was going to wash the feet of my husband, who had stayed home. He filled the dishpan with water and brought it to the TV room and washed my husband's feet in front of the beanbag chair.

The children perceive something essential about foot washing, something that is perhaps outside of the debate about its place in church tradition: the combination of playfulness, incarnation, and marginality, the fact that foot washing can be reinvented again and again. That is precisely what gives it power. Conducted out of a sense of obligation (as in the case of that poor disgusted priest years ago), the ritual loses its potency and its healing power. By its very nature, it is a ritual that must be freely given and received in all its permutations of humility and intimacy. CC

A youth group finds its purpose

Youth ministry isn't about fun

by Andrew Root

I AM SITTING in a nondescript church fellowship hall, attending a gathering of the church's youth group. Over the next hour, three people—a man in his fifties, a woman in her early thirties, a boy in tenth grade—get up and tell stories. Their stories all are in response to the same text—Matthew 19:16–30, the story of the rich young ruler—and the same prompt, "Tell about a time when the good was a difficult or confusing surprise."

As the stories unfold, music, laughter, tears, and friendship encase the stories as much as the four walls of the fellowship hall. It's a beautiful example of a youth ministry that is much more than an adolescent religious holding pen.

In the final 15 minutes, the youth group leader, whom I'll call J, laces these three stories together, drawing people deeper into the biblical text. She focuses in on the rich young ruler calling Jesus "good" and Jesus telling him that only God is good. She then invites the room to gather into groups of three or four, making sure each group has at least one young person and one not-so-young person. In the groups, participants end the night by praying for one another.

J and I have agreed to talk afterward. She motions me to a table. To my surprise a young woman joins her. As we sit, J says, "This is Lorena. She's in twelfth grade." I'm not sure why Lorena has joined us, but I'm happy to meet her.

I start with the obvious, asking, "What made you think of this kind of gathering?"

J starts by giving me context. "About two years ago, I was days from quitting as youth minister or, more likely, being fired. It was miserable. I was just a few years out of college, and my only youth ministry experience was a summer at camp. I was pretty good at the whole counselor thing, so I thought, *No problem. Youth ministry in a church is just being a camp counselor year-round*. I'd been the chief counselor of fun that summer.

"And so this church seemed like a perfect fit. The church wanted someone who'd create events and an overall program that kids would find fun. The idea was that if young people were having fun, then they'd have positive feelings about church and stick around."

"I could see that," I say.

"But nine months into it, it started eating me up," J continues. "I mean, it's one thing to be the chief counselor of fun for a week, then reboot with totally different kids for another week. But how do you do that in the day-to-day of church life? I knew things weren't going well. And the more I tried to make things fun, the more energy left the youth ministry and me."

"So what happened?" I ask.

"Well, a few people on the personnel committee started hinting that things weren't working, and my senior pastor took some steps to both encourage me and hold me accountable. But they all just kept coming back to fun: 'Teach them the Bible in a fun way,' 'Connect with them and have fun,' 'Make church a fun experience for my ninth-grade son.' As if fun were freedom instead of a chain around my whole body."

"So what happened?"

"*She* did," J says, pointing to Lorena.

"What did you do?" I asked Lorena.

With a cutting, dry sense of humor that made her seem older than twelfth grade, Lorena responded, "Oh, I just got some fluid around my heart and almost died."

> "'Make it fun,' they said. As if fun were freedom, not a chain."

J says, with equal measures of sincerity and sarcasm that nevertheless reveal a deep truth, "Having a kid in your ministry fighting for her life after some freak infection—*that* will change things for the chief counselor of fun pretty quickly."

"If youth ministry isn't for fun—because you watched Lorena almost die—then what is youth ministry for?" I ask.

J and Lorena look at each other and smile. Then Lorena says with bright eyes, "Joy."

Youth ministry is for joy, I say silently to myself. Over the past 15 years of teaching and writing, I've focused on the cross and the experience of suffering. Lorena almost died, and J nearly burned out, but when they say what youth ministry is for, they don't say *support* or *commiseration* but *joy*.

"Youth ministry is for joy," I repeat. "Why did you use the word *joy*? Clearly you've talked about it. And I know it's a biblical word, but it isn't a word we usually use, particularly connected to youth ministry."

"It's the best word we have for the experience of transformation," Lorena says.

J takes up that theme. "The more I was failing at youth min-

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STORIES ACROSS GENERATIONS: Youth ministry isn't just about young people having fun.

istry, the more people were sending me to popular youth ministry sites and conferences, which took me farther away from this deep sense of transformation. Some even talked about transformation, but it was really all about what you did and what you got kids to do . . . which only made me *more* burned out and tired."

"*That's* when I came in!" Lorena interrupts, with a fragile confidence, breaking the tense moment with some silly humor.

J laughed. "It is! When Lorena got sick, everything changed. And not only with our youth ministry, but with me, with the whole church. We started to witness real transformation."

Moving to the edge of my seat, I ask, "What did your youth ministry look like? What did you do? What changed?"

"We didn't *do* anything, really. That's why it was joy, because it came as a pure gift, not as something we did," J responds. "We had a sick kid, not a program or strategy."

"You didn't do anything?" I ask, not sure that could be true.

"No, you're right," J says. "We did start doing a lot of things, but that wasn't the point. We could only get to joy when we focused more on receiving."

Trying to push the conversation forward, I ask her how intergenerational storytelling had become part of the youth group. She takes me back to the day she found out that Lorena was sick.

"I remember when Lorena's mom called and told me she was in the hospital. Lorena had been sick for over a week and a half. Her mom was keeping me up to date because this big, fun youth group outing was coming up. I'll never forget that, because I was so stressed about the buses and just making sure everything was fun. I felt like that event would make or break me at the church. If kids had fun, I'd keep my job. But then, after that phone call, I just didn't care anymore."

"We just thought it was flu or something," Lorena adds. "I could barely even walk into the doctor's office. I just felt so dizzy and weak. Next thing I knew, two doctors were there. They did some other stuff to me. Finally, one doctor said to my mother, 'OK, Mrs. Martinez, we're going to have an ambulance take your daughter to children's hospital; we need to go very quickly.'"

Jumping in, J says, "I met them at the hospital. Finally, the doctors came out to give us an update. They said they hoped they caught the infection just in time, but they wouldn't be sure for the next few days. They'd need to keep Lorena unconscious to see how she reacted and allow her body the ability to respond to the meds. And it could be as much as a week or so before they knew if Lorena would recover."

J continues, "What I'll never forget is Lorena's mom repeating back to the doctors, 'If? If? If she recovers?' The doctors told us even if things took a positive turn, it would be months until she was well enough to go back to school. We were now stuck waiting. Lorena's mom was kind of furiously defiant; she sat down and said she wouldn't leave the hospital until Lorena did."

"And that's when I stopped doing youth group," J adds.

I'm moved by the story, and it gives me important perspec-

tive, but I really can't see how it shifts things from happiness and fun to joy and transformation. So I ask, "How is this all connected to joy?"

"Maybe it was the stress of the moment or all the Diet Coke I was drinking," J says, "but I started to notice how often people were referring to 'good.' The doctors and nurses used the word many times: 'It's not a good situation,' 'It's good we caught it now,' 'We'll see what her blood tests show; then we'll know how good our chances are.' Lorena's mom just sat in a chair holding my hand for the first hour, repeating, 'This isn't good.' And when we finally did get to see Lorena through the window, unconscious and all covered up and hooked up to machines, I found myself saying, 'This isn't good.' When I said that, all these Bible verses started coming to my mind. 'And God called it good' 'It isn't good for the human to be alone,' 'For every good and perfect gift comes from above,' and Jesus saying, 'Why do you call me good?'"

"That's the text you used tonight," I insert.

"It is," J says. "Focusing on the good has become central to our ministry. I'd actually say that youth ministry is for joy, because youth ministry invites young people to focus on the good, and only God is good. *Joy is when you find the good*."

At the hospital, J wrote an email to all the parents, called her youth ministry board, and sent a group text to all the kids. With Lorena's mom's permission, she informed them of what Lorena was facing, asked for their prayers, and said if they needed her, she'd be where God had called her, sitting next to Lorena's mom.

Within an hour Lorena's two closest friends and their moms showed up. When they arrived, J explained the situation and asked them all to simply sit with Lorena's mom and pray silently. They did so for a few hours. Then, after getting Lorena's mom some food, they left, only to be replaced by others. By the next day, every young person who'd signed up for the big fun event—and more who hadn't—made it down to the hospital to sit and pray, feeling the pull of the Good to be together.

> "Youth ministry is for joy. It invites young people to focus on the good. Joy is finding it."

What was even more amazing is that not only did the high school kids show up but other people from the congregation did as well. Kids and adults were now sitting together in the waiting room, praying and talking. Together they were following Jesus to the cross, seeking the good by sharing in the ministry of God, who comes near in a death experience, calling us into communion through it.

To J's surprise, on the afternoon of day two, Bernard showed up. As a matter of fact, over the next week Bernard was as present as anyone. It was beautiful but weird. He was a member of the church. That's how he found out about the custodian job there. But besides making it to worship once in a while, he wasn't around the community much. J would only later learn that he was a faithful member of a Tuesday morning Bible study and a committed participant in the church's AA group. However, none of the young people except Tannon really knew him.

Tannon was a senior who worked five to eight hours a week at the church, helping Bernard move tables and prepare the Sunday school rooms on Sunday afternoons for the coming week of preschool. Tannon was a good but direct kid. He had no problem asking difficult questions and pointing out things he found odd or misdirected.

When Tannon made it to the hospital, Bernard was in the middle of his second six-hour stint in the waiting room. He hadn't said much but just quietly sat across from Lorena's mom, listening in as kids and other church members talked and prayed. He'd become the soda runner those first few days, intent on keeping Lorena's mom and J fueled on Diet Coke. J would be lying if she didn't admit that she'd wondered more than a dozen times why Bernard was there.

constantly risking

absurdity and
death and
insanity, and

personal immortality

My Son so
performed His

miraculous acts

with no
safety net, neither
any thing up His
sleeve, nor even a
fire curtain

any where in sight

preferring to walk
a tight taut rope,

a Crimson Clown
as acrobat, not
an acrophobe
He trod

the thin wire of
Faith, like

walking on water

Carl Winderl

But soon that all became clear. And when it did, it changed everything for the next few days at the hospital, and from that point on, for the whole church. When Tannon arrived and saw Bernard, he sat down next to him and respectfully but loudly asked, "Why are you here?" Tannon and Bernard had spent enough time together for Bernard to not take offense. The two had built their relationship around direct talk. More than a few times Bernard had pushed Tannon to work harder and take more responsibility, even calling him back to church twice after 10:00 p.m. to redo his inadequate work from earlier in the afternoon.

Nevertheless, when Tannon asked Bernard why he was at the hospital, it sounded confrontational. Everyone seemed to freeze, holding their breath, not sure what would happen next.

Bernard looked at Tannon and said, "Twenty years ago, my baby girl died of something like this. And I wasn't there. I was high."

The vacuum created by Tannon's question was now filled with something else. Already frozen people froze stiffer, not knowing how to react.

Then Lorena's mom, who had been in a kind of dazed state, snapped back into the moment, looked directly at Bernard, and said, "What happened?"

And so Bernard told the story—all of it. When he finished, something remarkable occurred. For the next two hours different people, mainly adults, shared stories of loss, regret, forgiveness, and hope that most of the young people had never heard. People cried and people laughed; young people hung on every word. Tannon's direct question created an opening that was now filled with a spirit of communion, in and through the confession of the cross.

J tells me she remembers vividly thinking to herself, *Now, this is* good. "It wasn't good, like, *Oh, good, this will distract people!* or *It will be good to get some happiness and fun back in this hospital waiting room!* It was just standalone good. It was good to be together. It was good how the stories revealed and connected us. It was just good." She pauses and then says, "I looked around at everyone's faces while people were telling these stories, kids and adults sharing in each others' lives, experiencing God's work together. I remember this was the first time I thought to myself, *Youth ministry is for joy.*"

After Bernard talked, a woman named Kathy spoke up. Kathy was the mother of Nikki, one of the girls in the youth group. She was also the most vocal critic of the youth group. J said she couldn't help thinking that Kathy had come to the hospital to offer another criticism of the program. But Kathy said, "I had an experience like that."

Kathy went on to share a story of loss and Jesus' presence in it. Two years before Nikki was born, Kathy had a miscarriage. Rushing to the hospital while working late one night, she tried to save her unborn child. But it was too late. "Crushed, I sat in an empty waiting room not unlike this one,

waiting for Nikki's dad to come pick me up. I was overwhelmed, not only because I had lost this baby but also because it was such a struggle for us to get pregnant at all. I was sure it would never happen, and my dream of being a mom was turned into a nightmare."

Everyone was now hanging on Kathy's every word. It was the first time J had ever seen anything close to vulnerability in her. Bernard's story somehow awakened her to share.

Kathy continued, "When that all hit me, for some weird reason I stood up, covered my face, and started sobbing really hard. Next thing I knew, I felt some stranger touch my shoulder and comfort me. It was an old woman. She said, 'Sweetheart, truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.' That just made me cry harder, because it was a verse my grandmother used to quote when she talked about my mom being born. She struggled with infertility too. My knees buckled and I almost fell to the ground. I caught myself and sat down. I couldn't believe she quoted that verse. I asked her how she knew I needed to hear that verse, how she knew how precious those words were to my grandmother. She said, 'I don't know, the Holy Spirit just led me. I guess Jesus wanted me here; I thought I had some blood clots, so I came to the hospital, but it looks like Jesus wanted me to be with you.'"

"Whoa!" Tannon said.

Honey on the wound

Will prevent infection, my mother advised.
But when I stepped on nails, wailing from concrete,
she followed those spoonfuls with a tiny jar,
dripping eucalyptus beads for further protection.

Like Saturdays, when my pastor's husband bakes
Communion loaves in midnight's sacristy,
humming hymns and molding mysteries, yet
I pray extra blessings the next day as my lips

touch the bread. Afterwards, with its sacred remains,
I whisper third, fourth prayers in my kitchen
before spreading honey. I felt most sure of feasting
on Christ's body at my wedding, defying the hell

out of my mother's warning when love became
flesh there. But you can never be too anxious
about absolution. At least, my wife thinks no less
of me throwing logic to the wayside just as a mother

sees a gaping wound and can't hinge it all on honey.

Amy Lauren

Stepping out of the story, J says to me, "I remember feeling so drawn to Kathy's words about joy. 'Sorrow turned to joy.' I realized, sitting in that hard chair, that joy comes from the sharing of sorrow. Joy is this incredible experience of sorrow being shared, leading us into a community of love. That's what I was experiencing, the pure gift of sorrow being shared. I remember thinking to myself, *Yeah, it's true. Youth ministry is for joy because youth ministry is about creating a space for stories and moments of sharing that open us up to something big.*"

We sit in silence for a few seconds, and I think about the ramifications of J's words. I then ask, "What happened next with Kathy's story? I'm with Tannon—it's wild that the old woman used that verse."

"At the hospital, I quit being the lead counselor of fun and found a new vocation."

J continues, "Kathy then told us the old woman sat with her, holding her hand until Kathy's husband showed up. Kathy said, 'We exchanged numbers. I don't know why; it seems weird now. But she started to call me, and then we started to meet to pray together. When I got pregnant again, she was the first person I called, because I was both so happy and so scared. We prayed together every week through the whole pregnancy. I just had this sense that God was leading me through. I'll never forget when Nikki was born, seeing her hold Nikki, crying and praying for her. That's why she's Nikki, because in a waiting room like this God sent me Nichole Hunmurray, to pray for me, to see me through and bless us with our Nichole Marie Mattson.'"

J tells me that a silence came over everyone. After a minute, Kathy breathed in deep and said, "That's why I came today, why I wanted Nikki to be here. In a very weird way, waiting rooms are holy places to me. I'd somehow gotten myself disconnected from that experience, but when I heard Lorena was in the hospital, I knew I needed to be here." Kathy paused and then said, "I never intended to tell that story until Bernard told his, but I know it's why I'm here."

J says to me, "I thought to myself, *I want my youth ministry to be a waiting room like this one. A place where we share stories and are open to something bigger that ushers us into joy*."

So what happened after Lorena was released from the hospital? How did the experience in the waiting room continue, or did it?

"Oh, it continued; it continued by waiting. One of the kids—I can't remember who—actually started calling our midweek gathering the Waiting Room. Actually that's now its official name. That's what you were at. One of them even made up some T-shirts. Like I said, I stopped doing youth group in the waiting room, but I wanted to continue having young people wait with adults, sharing their burdens with one another as an experience of joy."

"But what were you waiting for?" I find myself asking.

"Well, at the start we were waiting for Lorena. When she left the hospital, she was still pretty much bedridden for the next almost ten weeks. That was super hard for her. She was missing a bunch of school activities and other important stuff. But it was even harder on her mom, who needed to work. She's a single mom, and it just wasn't an option to take more time off. She pushed that as far as she could when Lorena was in the hospital. So we thought of ourselves as gathering together to wait for Lorena to return to us."

J continues, "But in a crazy way that waiting moved us to do something: the more we were directly waiting for Lorena, thinking about her, the more we felt we had to do something for her. Next thing we knew, kids, parents, and a bunch of other adults from the church were helping Lorena and her mom out. Waiting for her together moved us into action, to do ministry. It was like the waiting ordained so many in our church to share in Lorena and her mom's life by being there for them, by sharing in their burdens. Joy started to spread across our congregation. And that really changed our whole church."

We pause for a second, and J continues, "But the Waiting Room became something else as well, which I guess is what really gave it its name. Right after Lorena went home, we all had this feeling that we'd experienced something important together. We just wanted to be together. But I had no time to plan anything, so I decided we'd just hang out. But the crazy thing is we just kept talking about Bernard's and Kathy's stories."

J's last comment intrigues me. I'm glad to hear that I wasn't the only one who couldn't shake those stories.

"The young people wanted to explore further what the stories could mean," J explains. "We became detectives in mystery. We had these amazing deep discussions about the meaning of life, purpose, and God in and through trying to discern what these stories meant for us, what they said about life. As the weeks passed, I started to read a biblical verse or two, and we'd connect it to these stories.

"Finally, one of them suggested we keep the Waiting Room going by inviting other people to come and tell their stories. It was like the young people now thirsted for stories, to get inside them and wrestle with them. It was like they needed more stories to figure out what made life worth living, who they could be in this world, and how God was acting. And since then it's now become a whole church thing. So I started inviting other adults from the church to tell their stories. The Waiting Room is now a multigenerational storytelling time when we together seek for God, experiencing something good together through trying to find meaning and purpose inside our stories."

"Man, that's cool" is all I can muster in response. Pausing, I add, "I bet that has changed your own sense of your job."

"One hundred eighty degrees," J quickly responds. "It actually felt like an amazing liberation. In the hospital waiting room, I quit being the lead counselor of fun and trying to build a successful youth group. So it's kind of amazing that we now have the Waiting Room every week. It reminds me of what I'm called to, of how God came to me and put one vocation to death, giving me the amazing joy of another. So the waiting room was not only the place where I buried J the lead counselor of fun, but the Waiting Room was also where I was given a new youth ministry life, a new vocation."

"What'd that look like?" I ask.

"I found myself spending more time with adults, coaching them in storytelling. I started learning about storytelling, both its mechanics and its theological importance. I started reading more, looking for stories, aware that the stories that connect us to something bigger often start in loss that's shared, leading to joy. I found myself spending more free time just being with young people, listening more than talking. Rested more than exhausted. I found myself in spiritual direction, being kids' and adults' spiritual director. Someone who set the table and invited the whole congregation into reflecting and probing for God's work in our lives."

We pause again. An odd, potentially tangential question comes to my mind. "What about Nikki? What happened to her?"

J's eyes grow wide. Then she shoots back, "Oh, that's crazy. She started showing up like every week. I couldn't believe it. When it was regular youth group that was about fun, she wanted nothing to do with it. But once the Waiting Room started, she'd show up early."

"Did you ever ask her why?"

"I did, mainly because I was worried that she felt weird about people talking about her mom's story. And then because we invited both Bernard and Kathy to come to one of those early Waiting Rooms so we could talk deeper about what they experienced. So I asked Nikki if this was all OK, or if it felt weird."

"What did she say?"

"She said it felt weird but good." CC

Lazarus, our brother

(from John 11:17–44)

Dead, poor thing: we dreamed of him,
those few days, crying, threshing,
in his stone room—no stories, no songs, his sisters

gone away. —Raised, he capers again
along the goat-tracks, yoohoos from the hills:
but the boys have stopped their tormenting—no fun to it,

him not minding. He lies at night, quiet,
eyes gleaming in the starlight. —Jolt of carcass, lurch
of clotty stenchy blood: to God's dear fool,

nothing is strange. —*When I was dead* . . . he doesn't ask.
Remember how he came out, unsurprised,
still smelling of spices, his grave-bands trailing?

Vuyelwa Carlin

Ross Wilson's portraits of Lazarus

Called from death

by Jessica Hooten Wilson

ROSS WILSON is an internationally acclaimed artist who was honored by Queen Elizabeth II with a British Empire Medal. If you visit London, you can see his portraits of Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott in the National Portrait Gallery; his work is also in the Tate Britain. Fans of C. S. Lewis may recognize Wilson's sculpture in Belfast, The Searcher*, which depicts Lewis opening the wardrobe from* The Chronicles of Narnia.

In November 2019, Wilson created a series of 60 portraits of Lazarus, The Calling of Lazarus*, for the Windgate Art Gallery at John Brown University, where I teach. The exhibit consists of portraits of equal size that line the gallery's three walls like a roll of film being spread out. Wilson's aim is to show Lazarus at the instant of animation, when he hears the voice of Jesus call, "Lazarus, come forth." Notably, Lazarus's features are African American.*

The evening I first saw the exhibit, I found myself filled with a wordless gratitude. I wanted to dig more deeply into why these paintings are so effective, so I asked Wilson if we could talk about them. He spoke to me from his home in Northern Ireland.

You're known for your portraits and sculptures. Why are you drawn to depicting real people?

People are important, but it's difficult to represent someone. Portraits are a very instinctive thing. When I'm mixing colors, I don't know the names of the colors; I know how to color by sight. I learned growing up that if I see someone doing something, I can usually repeat it.

The great American abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning described what he was trying to do in his work: he said that he was a "slipping glimpser." In a way, I'm a slipping glimpser—but some of those times that I'm slipping, I'm slipping forward, which is a good thing. Sometimes slipping can take you into places that you would normally not go. It's very organic, and I make a lot of mistakes. But sometimes you get to the right thing and it holds in the correct way.

What is the "right way" to capture faces and bring forth their presence?

To capture the likeness of a person in a portrait is not just a recording job. There's an unseen likeness, and you want to get to the center of that likeness. Sometimes you get to that place in the portrait where you know that you're with the person in the right place. It happens rarely.

The first time I remember it happening was when I painted Derek Walcott. I wanted to put the heat of the place and the heat of his words into the portrait. It was a difficult thing to do because of the pressure: it was for the National Portrait Gallery in London, my first big breakthrough.

Why did you decide to paint Lazarus?

The Lazarus portraits have an unusual starting point. The Lazarus story is amazing, with the idea of God's timing and the empathy Christ shows to a person whom he loved as his friend. The Lazarus and Zacchaeus stories both fascinate me because they're both about people being called out: one is called down a tree, and one is called out of death. Christ knew Lazarus before he called him. That idea was really important to me.

> "Christ knew Lazarus before he called him. That idea was really important to me."

Then I heard a song called "Lazarus" by Trip Lee, a hip-hop setting of the scripture passage. I saw a video on YouTube, with a group of dancers dancing to the song, which is absolutely unbelievable. It mesmerized me. The dancing was an important part of how they interpreted the story.

Lee wrote that song from his cultural position, which is a very different cultural position from mine, even though both of us were looking at the same truth. He was seeing it, and I was too, but in a different way. I saw what Lazarus was like through Lee's eyes in that song. I perceived the story through the eyes of an African American, and I'd never felt that before. I was thrown a little.

In contrast with your Walcott and Heaney portraits, the Lazarus portraits aren't based on a live person. Is there a different process for creating a portrait of someone you can't see?

There's more liberty when you're creating a new narrative, a new image. With a portrait commission, you're working with an established recognizable visage or likeness. With the Lazarus portraits, I had control over what he was going to look

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Photo by Grace Horton

COME FORTH: Ross Wilson's 60 portraits of Lazarus, on exhibit at John Brown University's Windgate Art Gallery, depict Lazarus at the moment of reanimation.

like. The idea of trying to make an animation from those 60 paintings emerged as I was painting them.

What you're doing with your art is glossing the biblical story. What do you hope people understand differently after experiencing your work?

The mechanics of the episode are the key to these portraits. The idea of Christ calling someone from death, and the idea of Lazarus being catapulted from death to life in a matter of seconds. I kept saying the words that Christ says: "Lazarus, come forth." Even with a dramatic pause, it happens easily within 20 seconds. The dead man comes out. There's no hesitation.

When you spoke in chapel at our university, you summarized the four stages of death: pallor mortis, paleness; algor mortis, cooling of the body; rigor mortis, stiffening of muscles; and livor mortis, when blood moves by gravity to the dependent part of the body. Then you asked students to consider, "What was it like for Lazarus when his blood warmed again, when his lungs filled with oxygen, when strength entered his pale, cold body, to have life come into him from the voice of Jesus?"

The direct structure and mechanics of the miracle are important—the cosmic reality of what happened internally with Lazarus. Lazarus was called out, and he came out directly through the four stages of death because of Christ's words. Not only is it profound, not only it is ethereal, not only is it hard to grasp when you look into it, but it is the power of Christ and his words and his identity as the Word.

These portraits are a weak illustration of the power of Christ. Even though they are pictures of Lazarus, they are pictures of Christ. They're portraits of Christ because they show the effect that Christ is having on Lazarus. We can't always see that when we look at other people. It's a rare thing to see the effect of Christ moving in people's lives.

The same Spirit that animates Lazarus animates us still, and there's something invigorating about seeing the story in these portraits. They make us slow down and pay attention, to see Christ in every second. Each painting represents a second in that reanimation process.

Yes, it's like a 60-point sermon.

Where each point of the sermon is to look more closely.

These portraits are made by excavating beneath the surface. That was deliberate: the way they are built up and taken back.

Can you talk more about that process?

It's a process that always intrigued me, even when I was a student. I realized you could make something by taking things away. Making art isn't just about applying something. You can create by erasing, or by taking a cloth to a painting and rubbing paint off. That's a fearful thing to do, but it can also get you to that place where big things happen. I used to do a lot of drawing, and I would rub, using an eraser, to give shadow and shade. Then I realized I could use a Black and Decker sander instead of an eraser.

It's like an excavation. These 60 portraits have been built up and then sanded back, then rebuilt and back again. It's about going back and forth. That process symbolizes the subject matter too: this life is built, and then it stops, and then Christ reaches in and brings it forward again.

PHOTO BY GRACE HORTON

LIMITED PALETTE: Ross Wilson used two colors—black and buffed titanium—to capture the moment Lazarus catapults from death to life.

As an artist, what did you learn about the resurrection from the process of the paintings?

The thing that really hit me when I was studying scripture—I'd never really studied that passage in such depth before—was the power of life in Christ's words. Jesus' commitment to go to his friend felt really theological to me. Just like Trip Lee's song. Some things we see, but there are other things that we only hope for. We have the advantage of seeing the full story in hindsight, but still wondering why.

That's the hard part of the story for me. That Jesus lets Lazarus die. Your paintings demand, through their starkness and lack of color, that believers wrestle with this reality—and the corresponding reality of Good Friday.

Basically, there are only two colors: black and a buffed titanium. But there are a lot of midtones in between where the colors mixed. Even with a limited palette like that, it can be quite complex.

The darkness of the paintings draws people into contemplating more viscerally the deaths.

Yes, and it's a close-up image. There's a bit of artistic license there. In the narrative, Lazarus was covered up. But the portraits look through that darkness to the moment which will bring joy and which will bring unity to a family again. The other darkness to think about is post-miracle: in chapter 12, the chief priests decide to kill the miracle. They are so determined.

How can we practice approaching the story—in the Bible or in art—so that we don't become like the chief priests as John depicts them?

It's about empathy. We make our first judgments by sight when we meet someone. We analyze someone within a few seconds based on how they look or what sort of car they drive or the kind of house they live in. We make all kinds of assessments that don't have any depth. The empathy of looking—what John Ruskin says about seeing with the soul of the eye—means we have to be careful about how we make judgments. Christ shows that there's a better way, a way to see truth.

"Even though these are pictures of Lazarus, they're also pictures of Christ."

It's not recorded in scripture, but Lazarus will die again. He may be an old man when it happens, but he will have gone through the trauma of seeing Christ die. He will have known more than many others about the experience of the resurrection of Christ.

The part of the story that's always frustrated me is that Jesus doesn't tell Lazarus he's going to be resurrected. Lazarus goes into death without that knowledge. I hadn't ever thought about the resurrected Lazarus interacting with the resurrected Christ.

Think of the impact Lazarus would have had on other people when they asked him to share his story. He would have been around; he would have been that witness.

Recently I was part of an exhibition called *Angels Among Us* at a church in Belfast. The organizers chose 24 artists and gave us each a scripture to work on. I was given the story about the strengthening angel that was sent to Christ in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43–44). I'd never looked at that story before. An angel comes and strengthens Christ in his anguish. He's experiencing in a much deeper way the anguish that Mary and Martha experience when Lazarus is at the point of death.

I made a head for the angel and layered it in gold leaf, with bright layers on top of tainted ones so you can see through to the layers that are tainted. The idea is that the angel is taking some of the anguish by being there for Christ, letting it reflect onto him and absorbing it. It comes back down to love: that's the core of the gospel, the core of Christ's message, the core of Christ being sent.

If Lazarus was at the crucifixion, he would have been almost like a strengthening angel, a living example of God's power to resurrect.

Yes. A living example of love and grace. CC

Faith MATTERS

by Debra Dean Murphy

Following the suffering Christ

DOROTHY DAY gave up smoking for Lent every year. Apparently, this made her so irritable that friends prayed she would take it up again, which she did. Thus the determination to quit the next year, and the next.

Lent can be relentless. There's so much of the body in it. This isn't surprising, since Lent prefigures the Passion: a human body's experience—at the hands of imperial power—of abuse and torture, suffering and death. Lent is also preparation for Easter, when Christians make the absurd claim that Jesus' body has been raised—and that through ritual actions involving water, wine, and bread, another body is constituted to do his bidding in a world of abuse and torture, suffering and death.

I have often found myself wanting to fix something about my own body during Lent: giving up guilty pleasures of one kind or another, or doing good deeds that might make me feel better about myself. But discipleship-as-self-improvement doesn't much resemble the way of the crucified Jesus. For those whose bodies are privileged, varyingly so in a culture like ours, what does keeping a holy Lent look like?

Mary Karr's poem "Descending Theology: The Crucifixion" paints a picture of tragicomic vulnerability: "You're not the figurehead on a ship. You're not / flying anywhere, and no one's coming to hug you. / You hang like that, a sack of flesh with the hard / trinity of nails holding you into place." The image of Jesus' body as an abandoned "sack of flesh" won't let us get away with sanitizing or spiritualizing the brutality. Earlier in the poem comes the observation that to be crucified is "to have oafs stretch you out / on a crossbar as if for flight." The humiliation and degradation of body and spirit, the pathos of false expectation (as if someone is "coming to hug you"), and the utter powerlessness of this body should prevent us from fetishizing the cross and sentimentalizing its victim.

For those of us whose bodies are privileged, can Lent open our eyes and hearts—meaningfully, materially—to neighbors whose bodies are routinely under scrutiny, under suspicion, under surveillance, who experience humiliation and degradation in the streets and in the courts, who are powerless against unjust systems and laws? Can we recognize the likeness of the crucified Christ in abused black and brown bodies in for-profit prisons, in the tortured bodies of sexual minorities, in the suffering bodies of babies separated from their mothers at the border?

I am reminded of the life and witness of Franz Jägerstätter, recently brought to the world's attention through Terrence Malick's exquisite film *A Hidden Life* (as much as an art film by the erudite recluse Malick can command the world's attention). A Catholic and an Austrian army conscript, Jägerstätter refused to swear an oath of loyalty to Hitler. Harassed by both civil and ecclesiastical authorities, he held fast. An unwillingness to swear allegiance and to fight in "the good war" was treachery in his social orbit and treason according to the law. Although he agonized over what his death would do to his wife and three young daughters, avoiding his fate was not an option. A year younger than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jägerstätter was beheaded in 1943 and beatified in 2007, setting a precedent for conscientious objectors to be counted as martyrs by the church.

But he's practically a saint, we might say. To which we might imagine Jägerstätter responding with one of Dorothy Day's famous lines: "Don't call me a saint; I don't want to be dismissed that easily." We don't remember Day for quitting cigarettes during Lent; we are moved by her life's work and chastened, perhaps, by her conviction that America's war economy and the engine that drives it—predatory capitalism—rob the poor of their dignity and deceive the privileged about their power. The corporal works of mercy at the heart of the Catholic Worker movement Day helped to establish are intimate, human gestures of gospel caritas. As she often asked: What else do we all want, each one of us, except to love and be loved?

When challenged by his bishop to consider his obligations as a husband and father, Jägerstätter responded by asking if these obligations required him to kill other husbands and fathers. His extraordinary witness is rooted in the questions that all ordinary followers of Jesus must ask themselves: Which stories do I live by? What does love of neighbor require of me? Where does my ultimate allegiance lie? When I consider the witness of Day and of Jagerstätter, I let myself off the hook if I think I am called to a discipleship less costly than theirs.

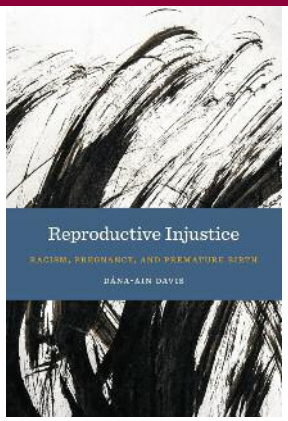
All of this matters all of the time, not only during Lent, since the way of the cross is the Christian life in sum. Yet boutique discipleship is always seductive—tidy, programmatic efforts at personal growth that can keep me at a safe distance from my neighbors in need. In these dark times, evils we might have thought long banished or repudiated are visited on the bodies of the most vulnerable among us (and on the planet that hosts us all), giving credence to Czesław Miłosz's observation in 1930s Poland that "if a thing exists in one place, it will exist everywhere." A holy Lent and our faltering attempts to live holy lives mean going where the suffering Christ is and, like Day, Jägerstätter, and so many others, bearing witness.

Debra Dean Murphy is associate professor of religion at West Virginia Wesleyan College.

IN Review

Birthing while black

by Justin M. List



Reproductive Injustice: Racism, Pregnancy, and Premature Birth
By Dána-Ain Davis
NYU Press, 272 pp., $30.00 paperback

A young woman of color recently came into my clinic for medical care during her work break. A few months before, she'd borne a premature infant. When I asked her an open-ended question about her experience in the neonatal intensive care unit, she told me I wouldn't be able to understand how much of a nightmare the NICU experience had been for her. She said she'd spent at least 12 hours a day in the NICU for weeks, and she insinuated that this was only the tip of the iceberg. As I read *Reproductive Injustice*, I regretted not having probed further into her story.

Dána-Ain Davis, an anthropologist who serves on a maternal mortality task force for the state of New York, paints an alarming picture of how medical racism affects black women's health and black infant prematurity. Her own medical encounters as an expectant black mother inform the book, but it's rooted primarily in the stories of other black women who were mistreated during their prenatal period and as parents of premature infants in the NICU.

Davis defines medical racism as "the ideas and practices that perpetuate racial hierarchies and compromise one's health or facilitate vulnerability to premature illness or death." She conducted nearly 50 ethnographic interviews with black women and men, health-care professionals, birth justice advocates, and administrators at the March of Dimes (an organization that works on reducing prematurity and supporting pregnant women). She uses her interviewees' experiences to demonstrate the pervasiveness of medical racism that black families experience around childbirth.

Davis contextualizes her interviewees' stories by examining them through an anthropological lens called "the afterlife of slavery framework." This framework examines the continuous recalibration of racism over time that leads to premature death, poverty, incarceration, and other injustices that fall disproportionately on black people.

In medicine, the afterlife of slavery often takes the form of tropes, presuppositions, or insinuations about pregnant black women. Davis incorporates a range of historical examples that delineate the evolution of the afterlife of slavery in eye-opening ways. Assumptions that black women are "more hardy" in childbirth, that premature black babies are "more fit," and that black women can tolerate more pain than white women stretch across America's colonized history.

Even today, the trope about black people having a higher pain tolerance represents a living vestige of racial science. A recent *New York Times* article (November 25, 2019) showcases how black people are often undertreated for pain and may have avoided part of the opioid crisis as a result.

In one of Davis's most vivid examples, a young pregnant woman named Ashley is diagnosed late with a threatening condition called preeclampsia. She asks questions and expresses her health concerns over a period of time, but she is repeatedly talked down to and dismissed by various health-care team members. When she finally goes to the hospital with severe symptoms, she needs an emergency cesarean section. Readers are left to wonder: If health-care providers had listened to Ashley sooner, could the emergency have been prevented?

As I read the first part of the book, I found myself wishing that Davis had offered more population-level public health data. Black women, even when controlling for income and education, have higher rates of severe maternal morbidity than women of other races and ethnicities. A discussion of this data could widen the scope of Davis's argument beyond her small set of ethnographic case studies.

Later in the book, however, Davis incisively describes the purpose of her ethnographic approach. She uses narrative discourse to bring context to the large-scale statistics and inferences that are built of individuals' stories. Part of the afterlife of slavery has been the tendency to explain away statistics by singling out black women and blaming their individual behaviors, treating each woman in isolation rather than pointing to systemic inequities and toxic stress and their effects on health. Telling multiple individuals' stories in aggregate works against this tendency; it creates a picture of structural racism.

Davis reiterates frequently that racism in medical encounters varies in intensity. It can be as subtle as a slight by a nurse or physician, or as frightening as a diagnostic lapse or delay. Furthermore, "racist intention is not necessary in the creation of racist outcomes." Some of her interviewees illustrate this point more convincingly than others, but her point is made by the existence in the stories she tells of a spectrum between intent and implicit bias.

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Where do we go from here? Davis argues that de-medicalizing the pregnancy and birthing process is one place to start. She interviews several radical birth workers—doulas, midwives, and advocates—who are trained to help black pregnant women give birth at home or in birthing centers whenever possible. They also provide mentorship, help with birth planning, and promote dignity in medical settings, serving as a liaison between a patient and a medical team. Radical birth workers aim to reduce infant prematurity and maternal and infant mortality. Limited evidence has been collected at this point on outcomes, but there is high satisfaction among clients.

Health-care professionals also need to work harder at dismantling racism. Davis provides examples of physicians and nurses anchoring themselves in social determinants (factors such as poverty, education, neighborhood) when explaining pregnancy disparities—at the expense of calling out the impact racism has on black pregnant women. Davis writes, "the repertoires of racism exist in the crevices and creases of a conversation, in the space between a comment and a pause. If doctors and nurses give dismissive looks or make a woman feel unworthy, that also constitutes a repertoire of racism." When health-care workers avoid race and racism in conversations about determinants of health, we pass up opportunities to identify and dismantle structural inequities at the bedside and in society.

The American health-care system must reckon with its place in the afterlife of slavery. This includes training in implicit bias, hiring more health-care professionals of color in senior clinical roles, and better understanding how racism has historically impacted social determinants of health. Davis concludes the book with a challenge for health-care professionals to "look racism in the face and question the ways that the system within which they work might contribute to racist outcomes, draw from racist discourse, or perpetuate racist ideas."

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I Can Do No Other: The Church's New Here We Stand Moment

By Anna M. Madsen
Fortress Press, 203 pp., $18.99 paperback

"As a pastor, you shouldn't take a stand one way or the other. You should just be neutral." I often hear lines like this from church members. I'm guessing they haven't read Anna Madsen's new book, which encourages Christians to be decidedly unneutral. In a time when Christianity tends to be popularly associated with either Trump's MAGA crowd or a gnostic spirituality that ignores real-world issues, Madsen makes the claim that Christians are those who stand publicly for justice.

Drawing on Martin Luther's theology of justification and the confrontation with church authorities it caused, Madsen joins other theologians and historians in identifying a new reformation happening in the church. Through attention to Luther's context and careful exegesis of current social issues, Madsen links the two eras in a fascinating way. By placing the two in conversation with each other, a robust social and political faith emerges—one that emphasizes not only personal forgiveness but also tangible, communal instances of justice.

Today's reformation, Madsen says, connects theology with ethics. Faith in Jesus Christ is not just a means to individual justification before God. It also inspires engagement in social, economic, and political justice. This reformation focuses on the implications of a gospel that delivers good news to the poor and oppressed, salvation that offers health and healing to those who suffer, and Jesus' resurrection that gives life to all of creation.

Mirroring Luther's stand against the

Reviewed by B. Parker Haynes, *pastor of St. Timothy United Methodist Church in Brevard, North Carolina.*

medieval church's sins, Madsen deftly critiques two of the biggest temptations of present-day Christianity: quietism and nationalism. When the post-Reformation church lost its status as the mediator of the faith, she notes, Christian faith lost its moorings in social and political realities. In many circles the result was quietism. But Christianity's depoliticization also left it vulnerable to other polities that may hold it captive, including the modern nation-state and the global market.

Madsen is well aware of the preacherly temptation to lambaste vague evils while avoiding concrete rebukes that might offend. She challenges her readers to be specific in calling for justice: name and condemn racist policies, pray for health insurance for all, and advocate for the reduction of fossil fuels and single-use plastics. She encourages Christians to address climate change, fake news, poverty, women's rights, sexuality and gender, immigration, and gun violence.

An apathetic and unengaged faith, Madsen argues, is a failure to live into the story of scripture, which is by nature political. It's also a failure to live into the gifts God has given us through Christ. Since "we are all justified, worthy in God's sight, we are all worthy of justice." The new reformation proclaims a faith that can do no other than to engage in concrete acts of justice in the world.

The church needs theologians like Madsen, particularly given the fall of Christendom, the deepening captivity of people of faith to nationalism and capitalism, and the staying power of the 81 percent. And I suspect that those closest to Luther's heritage—as Madsen is—may be best situated to recognize the deep cracks in Protestant Christianity and bring us out of the chasm. But I'm not sure that Madsen allows for an ecclesiology that's robust enough to get us where she wants us to be.

After reflecting on the multitude of issues and communities that need justice—which Madsen gets undeniably right—I couldn't stop thinking about the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's question: Whose justice? History is made up of particular communities who have understood and practiced different accounts of justice. The church and the modern nation-state represent two distinct traditions. What the nation calls justice, the church often sees as systemic oppression.

Madsen rightly takes nationalism to task. Her vision of church, however, is built around the same tradition of justice that has divided Americans along political lines. Rather than encouraging us to embody an alternative community that can witness to the nation what true justice looks like, Madsen settles for exhorting us to change our "apathy into compassion" and get out and vote. She isn't wrong about the dire need for justice. But she also isn't clear about how we are to bring this justice into reality.

I Can Do No Other is a richly theological reminder that what Christians believe about God should transform the way we live. But I was left wanting more. If we are in a new "Here We Stand" moment, I don't think the stand that's most required is to engage in politics more. It's to *be* an

alternative politics, embodying the kind of justice that the world can't understand. The sanctuary movement, through which congregations open their church doors to refugees and immigrants, exemplifies the kind of justice we need today, a kind that understands the church to be a political community.

Five centuries after Luther took a stand in reforming the church, we face a similar moment. The kind of justice Madsen seeks requires the imagination to create a church that is political without being beholden to the nation-state or the global market. It requires the courage not to stand for justice, but to let our justice stand for itself.

John Henry Newman: A Very Brief History

By Eamon Duffy
SPCK Press, 176 pp., $16.00

"I have no tendency to be a saint—it is a sad thing to say, Saints are not literary men," John Henry Newman wrote to a correspondent in 1850. But the Catholic Church has judged differently. Last October, Pope Francis conferred sainthood on the eminent cardinal and man of letters, completing the two-stage process that began with his beatification in September 2010. Newman is the first English saint to be canonized since the Reformation.

Irish historian Eamon Duffy provides a timely, balanced introduction to Newman's life. This is no easy task in light of Newman's many published works, diaries, and extant letters (20,000—among the most of any major Victorian figure) and given the intense passions Newman aroused both during his lifetime and afterward. Protestants did not trust him because he converted to Catholicism in 1845. Monsignor George Talbot, chamberlain to Pope Pius IX, once called Newman "the most dangerous man in England." Talbot was worried that Newman, precisely as a convert, did not fully toe the line on papal authority and thus might lead well-meaning Catholics astray.

During his lifetime, Newman was peripheral to many Catholic affairs, which had the European continent as their primary theater. But since his death in 1890, his stature has only grown. Some would rank him with Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and a handful of other giants of Christian thought.

While Newman's name was seldom invoked during the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), Duffy makes it clear that some of its key concerns and outcomes derive ultimately from his example. This is especially true with respect to granting the laity greater say in church practice and teaching—something taken from Newman's notion of *sensus fidelium*, the living sense of the faith held by practicing believers. It is also true with respect to Newman's idea of "the development of doctrine," his view that church doctrine is not static but matures into greater fullness and understanding over time. Arguably, this idea permitted the church to modify its teaching on religious freedom in the 1965 conciliar document *Dignitatis humanae*, which makes the case for religious liberty on the basis of innate human dignity.

But Newman's influence far transcends the Second Vatican Council. It extends especially to higher education. Tapped by Ireland's bishops to found a Catholic university in Dublin in the 1850s, Newman used the occasion to offer a series of lectures on the rhyme and reason of serious learning. These lectures were later gathered into a book, *The Idea of a University*, which according to Duffy now stands as "the classic defense of liberal education."

For readers in the current age of soaring costs, administrative bloat, and intense politics in higher education, this book sketches out a simpler and more profound view of education's aims: "wisdom," "the enlargement of mind," "the formation of character," and instruction in the ability "to grasp things as they are" and to develop "the instinctive just estimate of things."

Duffy also emphasizes Newman's pivotal role in moderating interpretations of papal infallibility—a teaching that made Newman cringe. In the view of many 19th-century papal loyalists, the teaching—defined for the first time at the First Vatican Council (1869–70)—meant that the pope's every utterance was a veritable oracle of God. Protestants, led by the British prime minister William Gladstone, charged that this teaching suggested that Catholics henceforth would be a fifth column in any government, since their ultimate loyalties were to a "foreign despot" in Rome.

Newman would have none of it. He penned a nuanced interpretation of the teaching in his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, in which he famously called conscience, not the pope, "the aboriginal Vicar of Christ." He pithily added: "Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after dinner toasts . . . I shall drink,—to the Pope if you please, but still to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards."

Duffy recognizes that Newman, like all saints, at times had clay feet. He could

Reviewed by Thomas Albert Howard, *who teaches humanities and Christian ethics at Valparaiso University.*

be domineering in relationships, easily offended, callous, and slow to forgive. Even so, Duffy concludes with praise:

> Newman possessed one of the most original Christian minds of modern times, indeed of any time. His significance for the Catholic Church, and for all churches, is neither as a model of mere piety, nor as a paragon of conformist orthodoxy, but specifically as a teacher and exemplar of Christian thinking at the edge; for the patient, generous, attentive, and interrogative mind he brought to bear on questions of good and evil, meaning and purpose, that are at the heart of religion.

Plenty of longer scholarly studies on Newman have been written, and beyond them Newman's own works and letters also beckon. For now, though, the most rewarding point of entry to the recently sainted cardinal's luminous and capacious mind passes through Duffy's concise, highly rewarding study.

Such a Fun Age: A Novel

By Kiley Reid

G. P. Putnam's Sons, 320 pp., $26.00

A 25-year-old black woman is accused of kidnapping a white toddler in a high-end Philadelphia grocery store, and her exchange with the store's security officer is caught on camera by a patron. Another customer repeatedly says she had a bad feeling when she eyed the woman and child together. The young woman is allowed to leave the store only after the child's white father arrives and explains that she is the babysitter. This incident of racial profiling begins Kiley Reid's debut novel.

Reid describes the book as a comedy. Although its opening scenario doesn't sound humorous, *Such a Fun Age* is a charming examination of class and race in America, with a perspective on "wokeness" that's both precise and devastating.

Babysitting is just one of the jobs Emira Tucker juggles to make ends meet. Her boss, Alix Chamberlain, is a lifestyle influencer who prides herself on her advocacy for modern women. Alix, however, spends most of her time missing her old life in New York City. It's only after the grocery store incident that Alix vows to live happily in Philadelphia, to write a book, and to get to know the woman who has been watching her child.

Alix begins to obsess over being an influence in her babysitter's life. She routinely looks at the screen of Emira's phone to learn what music she listens to and who she's been dating, using the information to make an inventory of potential conversation topics. She tries to woo Emira into intimate conversations over bottles of wine.

Reid masterfully embodies the mind of a white woman who is convinced of her own good intentions. Alix's inner monologue reveals how consumed she is with the concern that Emira is unable to see how progressive she is in her everyday life. "Alix fantasized about Emira discovering things about her that shaped what Alix saw as the truest version of herself," Reid writes. "Like the fact that one of Alix's closest friends was also black. That Alix's new and favorite shoes were from Payless, and only cost eighteen dollars. That Alix had read everything that Toni Morrison had ever written."

Alix becomes obsessed with showcasing these signs of her wokeness. She is desperate to be seen as Emira's family. But this desire has more to do with resolving her own identity struggles than with actually knowing or helping the young woman in front of her.

Emira is upset about the racial profiling incident, but it's only one of many concerns in her life. A college graduate with an English degree, Emira is still aimless while her friends excel. Her

worry over being able to afford a vacation to Mexico a year in the future takes up a fair amount of her mental energy. She constantly stresses over the reality that "when she didn't work, she didn't get paid." While her friends are receiving promotions, enjoying paid vacation days, and advancing into adulthood, Emira is on the verge of losing her health insurance and struggling with a palpable sense of being left behind.

The differences between Emira and Alix are stark. Alix, who is desperate for others to see her as an ally, tries hard to prove that she cares for the black people in her life. But it becomes clear that Alix's care is motivated by narcissism.

Kelly, the white store patron who recorded the confrontation, eventually becomes Emira's boyfriend. It's clear that he cares for her, but he never seems to fully understand what she experiences. Kelly frequently gets worked up over the night at the grocery store; he constantly encourages Emira to release the video and get the security guard fired.

But his outrage over the incident isn't what Emira wants. "You get real fired up when we talk about that night at Market Depot. But I don't need you to be mad that it happened," she tells him after an argument. "I need you to be mad that it just like . . . happens."

I'm not a person of color, and I found it uncomfortable to see the white characters so clearly and so often miss the point. The more I read, the more I sensed the source of my discomfort: some of my past actions feel a little too similar to those on the page. No, I have never tried to infiltrate my babysitter's life. But I have been careless and narcissistic in my desire to help. How many times, I wonder, have I missed the point?

Despite the discomfort it causes, the book is actually very funny. Reid is generous as she shows the complexities that come with relationships and interactions between employers and employees, lovers and friends—especially through the lens of race. She isn't condemning, but she also doesn't absolve anyone of their actions. Self-awareness seems to be the book's main lesson for both its characters and its readers.

Reviewed by Rachel Pyle.

BookMarks

Running for Our Lives: A Story of Faith, Politics, and the Common Good

By Robb Ryerse
Westminster John Knox, 180 pp., $17.00 paperback

Robb Ryerse was a "postdenominational" pastor in his early forties when he was recruited by an organization called Brand New Congress to run for Congress as a progressive Republican in his conservative district. In this memoir, he tells his story and pleads with readers to open up generous discussions across traditional divides. Ryerse lost his primary race to the incumbent, and of the 11 Brand New Congress candidates who won their primaries, only one was elected to the House of Representatives: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. But Ryerse's story reminds us that faithful engagement in politics isn't just about winning. It's about a lifetime of actions, questions, and collaborations focused on the common good.

We Own the Future: Democratic Socialism—American Style

Edited by Kate Aronoff, Peter Dreier, and Michael Kazin
New Press, 352 pp., $17.99 paperback

From the rallying of young voters around Bernie Sanders to academic critiques of finance capitalism, Americans' increasing interest in democratic socialism is evident. This book of essays captures a variety of perspectives on some of the most urgent issues that have fueled discussions about democratic socialism in the past few years: climate change, racism, voting rights, policing, mass incarceration, immigration, economic inequality, health care, public education, child care. Each chapter dives deeply into a single issue while attending to the intersections between all of them. The result is a remarkably broad overview of what a move toward democratic socialist principles might look like in practice.

Hatidze and her bees

Honeyland (directed by Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov) is a documentary film that follows the life of a beekeeper, Hatidze Muratova, who lives with her elderly mother in an otherwise abandoned village in rural Macedonia. Nominated for Oscars for both best documentary feature and best foreign film, it is a visual masterpiece, introducing its viewers to an incredible, particular life and transforming that life, through its visual medium, into a myth of our moment.

When we meet Hatidze, she seems like a figure out of time. She dresses in peasant skirts and well-worn scarves. The small house she shares with her elderly mother is earth-lined and lacks running water, electricity, and indoor plumbing. She spends her days crossing a magnificent natural landscape—her body the only human figure in sight—to tend her wild beehives, which are nestled in high mountain crags or in stone ruins from the region's Greek and Roman past.

She is not, of course, actually out of time but an anomaly in a recognizable wider modern world. Her location in that world is slowly revealed as airplanes crisscross the sky above her and when she takes a bus to a much larger city to sell her honey in open-air markets. She haggles and jokes with the vendors, discussing the importance of cross-cultural understanding among Bosnians, Albanians, and Turks (she's the latter). These are hints of the geopolitical realities of the region that no doubt contributed to the emptying of her village, but they are never discussed. She buys bananas, a tangible reminder of the forces of globalization that link her honey to a system of worldwide exchange, and hair dye, which she scrutinizes for exactly the right shade of chestnut brown.

We don't know why Hatidze and her mother didn't leave the village when everyone else did. But she seems to have assessed the crowded poverty that would await her in the city and opted instead for the rhythms of a life set by her relationship with the bees, whose flourishing is intimately connected to her own. "Half for them, half for me," she explains when it is time to harvest the honey. This philosophy of moderation and conservation protects the social and productive order of the hive, and the bees in turn keep making enough honey to support their human partner.

Her interdependence with the bees, far more than her clothing or lack of electricity, marks her as not of her age. She refuses the logic of accumulation and profit, marking time not by efficiency and productivity, but by daylight, seasons, and ecological balance.

This balance is upset when a family of migrant beekeepers show up trailing livestock and children, both of which seem to keep multiplying. The family lives under

NEON

***ALONE WITH BEES:** Beekeeper Hatidze Muratova lives and works in an otherwise abandoned village in rural Macedonia.*

extraordinary pressure from a greedy honey dealer to whom they are in debt. Hatidze's methods don't produce enough honey to pay their debts and meet their own expanding desires. Soon reckless, destructive practices are introduced that threaten Hatidze's bees and the ecological order of her small environment.

The filmmakers met Hatidze unintentionally when they were sent to the region to film a short documentary about environmental change. When they were making *Honeyland*, they intentionally hid their own presence despite their intimacy with the subjects. They slept in tents in Hatidze's front yard and followed her daily life for three years, but Hatidze never speaks directly to the camera. The filmmakers also did not speak Turkish, the language spoken by Hatidze and her neighbors, so they did not know what anyone was saying. Rather, they edited the film as a visual story that could be understood without language. Translations and subtitles were among the final things added.

The result is a visually stunning film that has an allegorical and even mythical quality to it. There is something timeless about the struggle of rapacious greed to devour the land and resources it depends on. Hatidze, her neighbors, and the debt collector appear like characters in an ancient story, one we have never properly listened to or understood.

This film is invested in making us listen and understand, but the message is not one of direct political action. Its focus is highly particular, more so than almost any documentary I have ever seen. Hatidze's life is not exemplary—no one else is living it. But by framing her as a kind of mythical symbol, the film makes her story speak universally. It is a reminder that the forces of greed, profit at all costs, and disregard for the environment have covered the globe, reaching into the unlikeliest of corners.

Yet the film is a documentary, which reminds us that Hatidze's story ultimately is not an allegory. There really is a Hatidze. And we are better—beautifully, transcendentally better—for having met her in this film.

The author is Kathryn Reklis*, who teaches theology at Fordham University.*

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ON Art

Study for MYDHA **(left) and** ***Study for SYAH*** **(right), by Tobi Kahn**

Tobi Kahn is fascinated by the edges of abstraction. The surfaces of his paintings swell with forms that can appear both macrocosmic and microcosmic, as if depicting the contours of a distant nebula or a cell dividing under a microscope. In 2019, Kahn set himself yet another challenge, taking up the human figure as subject for his paintings and works on paper for the first time in more than 30 years. His paintings continue to tread the border between abstraction and figuration, but in these works he finds strangeness and unfamiliarity in the most intimate subjects, standing right before him. His figures stretch their limbs with the elegance of dancers, but beyond that it is impossible to establish any identifying characteristics. Like Amedeo Modigliani, Kahn has a gift for creating images of people which are simultaneously someone and everyone. The artist says he seeks to capture a "liminal moment, before the apprehension of gender and sexuality, an uncertain moment filled with possibility." It is in this untrammeled potential that Kahn opens a door to the divine.

Art selection and commentary by Aaron Rosen*, director of the Henry Luce III Center for the Arts and Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., and visual arts editor for* Image *journal*

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