

“He is in all ways one of us”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

In this week’s midweek meditation we encounter the theology of the Roman Catholic Black theologian, Diana L. Hayes. Dr. Hayes is Emerita Professor of Theology at Georgetown University and addresses issues related to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, issues of race, gender, and class. Dr. Hayes writes,

If God became incarnate in a human being, a male, a Jew, taking on all of the characteristics and appearances of that humanity, so must the church, expressive of Christ’s body, incarnate itself today in the peoples and cultures with whom it has come into contact. This is not optional; it is mandated.

The doctrine of the incarnation takes up the heart of the Christian message to the world: “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen its glory*” (John 1:14). In being born in human form, the eternal Word of God assumed our humanity is the fullest sense of our existence for all people, ethnicities, genders, and nations. There is no person who is excluded from the shared humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. We do not know what Jesus looked like or what his voice sounded like, but we believe that he is the “new Adam,” the hope of all people. Paul writes, “*For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous*” (Rom. 5:19). As we all share the burden of sin, so too through faith, we all share in the benefits of Christ. Paul describes the finality of our judgment under sin and our salvation by the grace of Christ: “*For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ*” (1 Cor. 15:21-22).

Dr. Hayes describes the meaning of the fullness of Christ’s incarnation for all people and the whole church. The church as Christ’s body must continue to allow itself to be the incarnation of Christ in the world where all people are not only welcome, but where each person finds their humanity fully affirmed by the living presence of Christ. Dr. Hayes writes,

Jesus as immanent humanity is brother and sister. He is in all ways one of us, walking and talking with us, sharing our journey and carrying our burdens, suffering the pain of our oppression and rejection; yet as transcendent Son of God, he will come forth in glory to lead us to the Promised Land.

Like Paul’s description of Christ both sharing our humanity and making us righteous, Dr. Hayes describes Jesus as our fellow sojourner and co-sufferer, and the One who will lead us to a promised place of new life without the burden of sin, suffering, and human oppression. As Dr. Hayes writes, Jesus Christ is the One who gives us “the courage to fight back against our oppressors and to ‘keep on keepin’ on.’” This is the fullest sense of the incarnation, not simply as an abstract theological concept, but as a living, indwelling, incarnate presence within the human spirit that gives courage and hope to the brokenness of human existence in the daily reality where we live.

As a womanist theologian Dr. Hayes argues that through Christ Jesus “full human liberation” can be achieved helping humanity work for the elimination of oppression in all forms. If Jesus is the incarnate Word of God, then Jesus shares our humanity with all people no matter who they are or how they are. We do not get to pick and choose who is “in” and who is not, because in becoming human Christ

assumed all humanity. “*For God so loved the world,*” writes John, makes “the world” the place of God’s complete and loving redemption. That humanity finds it hard to fully realize this is a sobering sign of our own ongoing struggle with sin and our daily need of grace. It is a reminder that Jesus walks with us and shares our struggles, and we need to lean on him for grace and strength. Nevertheless, Christ’s sharing of the world’s humanity is what makes his body the church universal and catholic.

Dr. Hayes reminds us that the catholicity of the church is centered upon the universality of Christ’s work for the world, not an assumed universality of one privileged context. The world has many varied cultures, languages and nations, so theology as “God-talk” is the conversation people have about God in their context. As Dr. Hayes writes, we cannot talk about God and faith “except from within the context of who we are.” Just as early Christians proclaimed the good news in their context and languages, so too, we do the same. There is no one context that is better than another, and all the world is the place of God’s self-revealing love in Christ Jesus. As Dr. Hayes writes of Jesus, “He is in all ways one of us.”

Like the phrase “home is where you live,” we each live in a particular place, hear God’s word in a specific language, and witness to God’s love in a given cultural context. To be a Christian is to seek meaning about “who we are and whose we are” through faith. Like Augustine’s maxim, “unless you believe, you cannot understand,” Dr. Hayes quotes St. Anselm’s “faith seeking understanding.” She writes, “We must then share that understanding with all the church. For it is in learning the “truth” of ourselves that we are empowered to continue the struggle, ‘leaning on the everlasting arms’ of our God.” It is through faith that we finally understand our neighbor and their struggles, and that, together, with all peoples, we finally see and believe that all the world is the object of God’s grace and love. Amen.

Week 11 midweek meditation readings:

(Excerpt) “Introduction: We’ve Come This Far By Faith” in *Taking Down Our Harps*

Theology, in its simplest understanding, can be seen as “God-talk.” We, as African American Catholics, often become intimidated when asked to reflect theologically on a matter of importance to us, such as our relationship with God or how we see our role in the church, because we see ourselves as academically unqualified. There are too few of us with academic degrees in systematic theology. Yet when asked simply about God’s action in our lives or the working of the Holy Spirit in our midst, our reaction is quite different.

Although academe may not recognize our reflections as such, we are indeed speaking theologically when we do this. And as African Americans, we have been doing so for all of our existence. What we have done, as a holistic people in whom the sacred and secular are intertwined rather than alienated, is simply to talk about God, about Jesus Christ, about the Holy Spirit and about their importance in our lives, a God that you can lean on, a brother you can depend on in your darkest hours, a Spirit that walks with you and brings peace to a troubled soul. We have not put our theology down in dry, dusty tomes that no one can or really wants to read; we have lived it in the midst of our daily lives. That theology has been expressed most clearly in our songs, in our stories, in our prayers. We talk of a God who saves, a God who preserves, a God who frees and continues to free us from the “troubles of this world.”

Theology can also be seen as “interested conversation.” In other words, theology is talk, dialogue, discussion, conversation about God and God’s salvific action in the world, not from an objective, unbiased stance – because no such stance truly exists – but from the perspective of one who is “involved,” one who is caught up in that discussion, one whose involvement is “colored,” as it were, by his or her own history, heritage, and culture. We cannot speak about the church, Jesus Christ or anything else except from within the context of who we are, a people caught in a daily struggle to survive despite

the constant assaults of racism, prejudice, and discrimination from the institutional structures of both our society and our church...

We are African Americans: a people with roots deeply sunk in the history and culture of our African homeland yet also a people with a long and proud history in the United States. Both strands of our heritage are important in defining who we are. Neither can be denied without denying an important part of our very selves. That understanding of “who we are and whose we are” affects our theologizing. It “colors,” quite simply, our concept of God, our faith in Jesus Christ, our existence in the Holy Spirit, our total understandings of what it means to be truly Black and authentically Catholic. Our reflections are not abstract or objective; they are particular because they are grounded in the particular context of African American history, which is a history of slavery, of second-class citizenship, of discrimination, both in U.S. society and in our mother church as well. More important, it is also a history of struggle, of perseverance, of hope, of faith, and of survival against all odds and all obstacles placed in our path. (pp. 6-8)

In order to learn about ourselves, in order to understand and accept “who and whose” we are, we must reflect on both faith and its praxis, seeking to understand for ourselves, in language of our own choosing, the constant presence of God within our lives while recognizing with St. Anselm that theology in its truest sense is “faith seeking understanding.” We must then share that understanding with all the church. For it is in learning the “truth” of ourselves that we are empowered to continue the struggle, “leaning on the everlasting arms” of our God.”...

As the church finally opens to the contributions of every race and ethnicity, it must also expand its understanding and expression of God and Jesus Christ. This correlates with our understanding of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. If God became incarnate in a human being, a male, a Jew, taking on all of the characteristics and appearances of that humanity, so must the church, expressive of Christ’s body, incarnate itself today in the peoples and cultures with whom it has come into contact. This is not optional; it is mandated...

As Black Catholics we are full members of the Catholic communion. We have struggled for a long time, but the journey is nearing its end. As we continue toward that end, we take as our mandate the words of the prophet Isaiah: “They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (40:31). Our faith has not faltered, and our Spirit has been renewed. We are truly Black and authentically Catholic. As we continue to deepen our own understanding of ourselves, we offer the gift of ourselves to the Roman Catholic Church, acknowledging that there is still much work to be done. Yet, we have come this far by faith, and that faith will lead us home.” (pp. 11-13)

(Excerpt) “And When We Speak: To Be Black, Catholic, and Womanist” in *Taking Down Our Harps*

Historically, women have been the unheard voices calling for recognition and the freedom to speak of their lives in words of their own choosing. Women of color have especially suffered from the oppression of others, both male and female, of their own and other races and ethnicities, speaking for and about them.

Black liberation theology in the United States has been seen, historically, as a product of the Black Protestant church and community. The leading scholars in the field have been Black men, most of whom are ordained in the historically Black Methodist or Baptist churches. It has been little more than a decade that Black women, also predominantly Protestant, have become a significant part of the dialogue. The reasons for this are both historical and social as well as religious.

Black women, whether Protestant or Catholic, while the mainstay, historically, of the Black church, have held few recognizable roles of responsibility or leadership within them, especially as ordained

ministers. As increasing numbers of Black Protestant women earn doctoral degrees in theology or are ordained, their influence has begun to grow. (p. 102)

Black theology emerged in the late 1960s as an articulation of predominantly Black male voices and concerns. Early Black theologians presented a perspective on Black history, culture, and faith that often rendered Black women voiceless and invisible. Their seminal writings, in exclusive language, paid little or no attention to the strengthened courage of their Black sisters, who had managed to “mother” a new people, African Americans, into existence in union with their men.

Thus, in the face of this absence of Black voices from all theological perspectives, a need was seen for Black women (and other women of color) who were rooted in their Christian faith to begin to “speak the truth” to their people and the greater United States society. Adapting the term *womanist*, as defined by Alice Walker, African American women proceeded to articulate the truth about Black women’s lives in the Americas for the past five centuries...

Both Black and feminist theologies were seen as engaging in “God-talk” from a too narrowly particular and exclusive context, erring in seeing their own particular experiences as the norm for all theologizing. The result was theologies that saw racism or sexism as the only issues, thereby ignoring issues of class, homophobia, and ethnocentrism, among others. In response to these narrow foci, womanist theologians, however, assert, that full human liberation can be achieved only by eliminating not only one form of oppression, but all forms. (pp. 104-105)

The Black Catholic understanding of God and Christ is therefore also “colored,” if you will, by that liberationist understanding. God and Jesus are not problematical; they are both immanent and transcendent in our lives. The immanent God loves us and nurtures us like a parent bending low over a child; the transcendent God is free to judge those who oppress us and to call us forth into freedom. Jesus as immanent humanity is brother and sister. He is in all ways one of us, walking and talking with us, sharing our journey and carrying our burdens, suffering the pain of our oppression and rejection; yet as transcendent Son of God, he will come forth in glory to lead us to the Promised Land. And we rejoice in the Holy Spirit, that balm of Gilead sent to heal our sin-sick souls, to abide within us and to strengthen us on our journey while giving us the courage to fight back against our oppressors and to “keep on keepin’ on.” (pp. 111-112)

Reading recommendations:

Hayes, Diana L., *Forged in the Fiery Furnace: African American Spirituality*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012.

Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States. Edited by Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998.

Diana L. Hayes is Emerita Professor of Systematic Theology at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., and a member of the Council of Elders of the Sankofa Institute for African American Pastoral Leadership at Oblate School of Theology. Dr. Hayes holds degrees in law, religious studies, and sacred theology: George Washington National Law Center (J.D.), Religious Studies (Ph.D.) and the Pontifical Doctorate in Sacred Theology (S.T.D.) both from the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. Dr. Hayes was the first African American woman to earn the Pontifical Doctorate in Sacred Theology. She has received numerous awards including the Elizabeth Seton Medal for Outstanding Woman Theologian, and the U.S. Catholic Award for Furthering the Role of Women in the Church, as well as three honorary doctorates. Dr. Hayes is the author/editor of nine books, and has lectured widely in the U.S., Europe, and South Africa on issues of race, class, gender and religion, womanist and Black theologies, women in the Catholic Church, and African American Religion(s).