Rooted in the Heart of Relationships A personal theology of ministry and discipleship

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Rooted in the Heart of Relationships

A personal theology of ministry and discipleship
by Meghan Stretar

At the end of my first semester in the Master of Divinity program here at the School of Theology, I wrote the following definition for my understanding of ministry: *Ministry is rooted in the heart of relationships; this permeates the soul of community.* While it has been two years and half of a pandemic later, this same understanding of ministry resonates with the work in which I am engaged, the work which energizes and fulfills me, and the kind of work which allows my gifts and charisms to shine forward.

As with authenticity and self-identity, it becomes increasingly clear to me that relationships stand at the heart of ministry as something that must be given proper attention. Johann Adam Möhler describes “theological realities” as rooted in relationships not only with the Spirit, but also with each other. This is an incredible step towards understanding what ministry can and should be. In defining a theology of ministry, it is clear relationships deserve a central role. In his *Foundations*, Karl Rahner describes freedom as “the capacity of the one subject to decide about [herself] in [her] single totality.” How would ministry be possible without knowing the other person in all their developing authenticity and in their wholeness? How are we expected, as ministers, to send disciples out into the world if we do not have a relationship with either?

Rahner’s emphasis on the experience of the human person stretches my thinking of ministry as well. He places a great amount of weight on the image of the human person as a whole being who needs to grow in self-awareness and to develop metacognitively in order to radically experience our own existence. The way he links the human experience to this discussion on freedom makes sense for me, based on my own experience of being human. As easy as it could be to forget, as I live alone in the midst of this global pandemic, I recognize I don't live in a vacuum and realize that I was created to be a social being who exists with others. Reading how my totality as a human being also includes interacting with others who are also exercising this same freedom leads me more deeply to reflect on the way in which I have been called by God to mentor, encounter, and accompany others on their life journey (while I, at the same time, navigate my own). There is an intimate both/and here, it seems, between us, others, history, time, and the mystery not only of God but also of ourselves.

Looking at my own theology of ministry (and teaching philosophy, for that matter), I am aware it is deeply rooted in this idea of creating and maintaining relationships rooted in trust and vulnerability. This is held in balance with ideas presented in Parker Palmer’s book, *Let Your Life Speak*, where he writes about the key to forming intentional community. He writes how it involves “holding a paradox—the paradox of having relationships in which we protect each other’s aloneness.” I strive to grow in my personal freedom by becoming more myself, but also in my freedom in Christ striving to become more Christ-

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like each day: someone who is able to recognize the wound in my side, and attending to it, while also attending empathetically and compassionately to the needs of others.

It is a striking image that we, as the people of God, are to seize and act upon the very presence of Jesus Christ, as a result of our incarnational relationship with him. My response to this image is the very human one: What exactly does this mean in our here and now? In fitting into the images of spirituality as the essences of who we are: our eros, our fires, and our deepest authentic selves (this joy of vocation) this image of our companionship and oneness with Christ fits in naturally. This image speaks directly to this statement of my theology and understanding of the human person as being inherently holistic, good, and worthy of relationship.

There is a deep importance in being able to see all people as embodiments of Christ. While I struggle with this at times, thinking of people in which I wish I could make exceptions, I am reminded of how far this power of the incarnational image of Christ extends. This is when part of me says, wow, it is awesome to think of what viewing the Church as the Sarx, the deeply flawed, exzemed body of Christ, means, because we all are human, created in the imago dei; we have faults and flaws, and those things are what make us human. When I take a moment to step back even further, I know I cannot claim that there are some people who simply do not have Christ in them. Instead, I find myself trying to find avenues in which to locate Christ within them. Scaling back to my small world, I’m brought back into the idea of how important it is to build up relationships with people slowly, where we can lay out our human flaws together, so I might discover who the person is as authentically themselves.

From this place, the following commitments flow naturally. Because of my definition of ministry as coming from the heart of relationships, I am committed to:

Define what living authentically looks like for me. Before I am able to engage with others, I first must be at a place where I am able to recognize my own sense of worth within myself. To live in a truly authentic way means that my soul is moving towards God and toward greater integration within my entire being. My daily actions and thoughts, while difficult at times, should always be in conversation and union with what is going on around me, internally and externally – I need to not only ‘talk the talk’, but also ‘walk the walk’.

Begin with asking the following questions: “who is this person, what do I know about them, what are my assumptions, blind-spots, and stereotypes, and how might we overcome those and come into union together?” Asking and reflecting on these questions helps me remember how spirituality is not just an individual endeavor but is “always as much about dealing with each other as it is about dealing with God.”

Listen contemplatively and build relationships out of a place of listening. This requires attentiveness, mindfulness, and presence to stay with another’s story; it is important to my ministry because of my commitment to also share my own story. To expect another to listen to my story means that I must also respect theirs. An intentional, safe space must be established first.

By doing this, the needs of the community and individuals themselves will naturally emerge and provide the space to accompany each other to achieve a shared, larger goal that is greater than anything we could have created alone.

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