

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



NUMBER 257 – MARCH 2014

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Ash Wednesday reflections

For much of my life I was barely aware of Ash Wednesday. I don't think it was ever mentioned in my church, just as Lent wasn't.



As I got older, however, I started noticing a few people showing up at school or community activities on Ash Wednesday with a cross of ashes on their foreheads. I knew that meant they were Episcopalians or Catholics. I thought of Ash Wednesday observance as mainly something that Catholics did, along with saying the Rosary, having statues of Mary in churches, and praying to saints—practices that my Methodist family and friends frowned on. We thought of them as worshiping idols.

Church changes and new information

But then something changed in Methodist churches, including mine. Evidently it was related to the ecumenical movement, which my family and friends saw as mostly bad because it seemed to give an undeserved stamp of approval to Catholic beliefs and practices. But for whatever reason, my Methodist church started observing Lent and even having Ash Wednesday services that featured putting ashes on worshipers' foreheads.



That surprised me. It was such a change from what I'd always assumed was right. But later in life, when I began examining my beliefs and learning about church history and other religions, I saw that some of the spiritual practices that I had assumed were only Catholic had actually been common throughout Christian history, and not just for Catholics.

I also saw that such practices could be helpful for Christians of any denomination. But I still wasn't inclined to adopt any of them. The messages I'd been given for so many years were too firmly engraved.

A life turned upside down



Ash Wednesday this year is March 5. Whether you observe it in a church or not, I urge you to make it and the Lenten season a time to read some of what Sara Miles has written.

"I'd been blindsided by my unplanned first communion," Miles writes in *City of God*, "turned upside down by eating that bread and drinking that wine and finding God, whom I didn't believe in, alive in my mouth." St. Gregory of Nyssa, the San Francisco Episcopal church in which this experience happened, became Miles's home and the center of her new life. She started a food pantry that offered free groceries around the altar to hundreds of families, first at St. Gregory's, then elsewhere. As a lay minister, she got involved in planning liturgies, began preaching, and eventually was hired to direct pastoral care.

A full-body experience of God

Miles explains that at St. Gregory's, worship is meant to offer a full-body experience of God, not just chatter *about* God. As part of that offering, in 2010 she helped St. Gregory's to offer its Ash Wednesday liturgy on the street, in a public plaza, for the first time. Administering the ashes outdoors in public, wearing her cassock, was a jolt for Sara Miles at first. For her, she says, the line between respectable churchgoer and lunatic evangelist had been rapidly eroding, and now she feared she had gone over the edge. But she saw that even the Ash Wednesday participants who weren't conversant in Christian ritual "sort of realized it was an invitation to acknowledge limits. To bow down in public and say, I'm not in charge; I'm not going to live forever. And they were really, *really* interested in that."



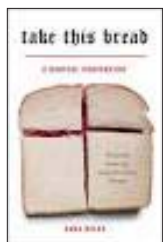
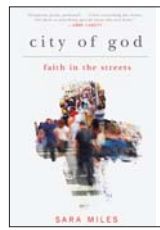
Ash Wednesday's good news

"The good news of Ash Wednesday, the blessing so many people seek so fervently," finds Sara Miles, "comes from acknowledging the truth: that we are all going to die ... that these busy lives are going down to the dust."

... You are dust,
and to dust you
shall return.
—Genesis 3:19

Surprising but timely

A book I read recently, however, gave me a new perspective on Ash Wednesday and even on the church. It is *City of God: Faith in the Streets* (Jericho Books, 2014), in which author Sara Miles reports her experiences and feelings related to Ash Wednesday observances. I found the book so intriguing that as soon as I finished it, I immediately read Miles's earlier book *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (Ballantine Books, 2008) and found it equally compelling.



Take This Bread, about what led Miles to become a Christian, says a lot about her view of communion and her experiences with it. To my surprise, reading the book was timely for me because I'd been thinking and writing about communion for recent

issues of *Connections*, and hearing from readers about their communion-related views and experiences. Was my coming across this particular book at this particular time just a coincidence? I wonder.

A world very different from mine

Sara Miles's experience, both religious and secular, has been very different from mine and from that of the people I know personally. Her books describe a world with which I've had no first-hand experience.

Some other Christians may feel that her behavior and views show that she isn't Christian. But her story made me more aware than ever, of how different from each other Christians can be, and of how different congregations need to be if the church is to reach people whose experiences and surroundings differ so greatly.

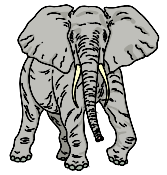


Memories of elephants and desert stars

"Mine is a personal story," Miles explains, "of an unexpected and terribly inconvenient Christian conversion, told by a very unlikely convert." Her grandparents were Christian missionaries, mainly in Asia. Her father was born in Burma. Her mother, she writes, descended from long lines of preachers,

evangelists, and soldiers of the Lord. She was carried in a laundry hamper across the ocean to Baghdad, as part of the United Mission in Mesopotamia.

After years in Asia, these grandparents brought their children to the U.S. and took churches in Baltimore, Missouri, and New York. "While my parents cherished memories of stars in the desert, elephants, tropical rainstorms, and dates," Sara tells us, "the repressed, small-town American churches both families returned to when their children were young were suffocating." As a result, Sara says, although her parents were proud of their parents' social activism, "my mother still smarted from the basic intellectual affront she'd felt as a child when told to repeat aloud things she felt were untrue." She nursed a grudge against Christianity for more than fifty years. Sara's father, a sociologist, was equally turned off by Christians' belief claims and aggressive evangelistic practices.



Distrustful of all kinds of dogma

Sara was born in Greenwich Village. At 18, she went to Mexico City to attend "a tiny radical college founded by internationalist Quakers and communists." The worldwide upheavals of 1968 riled her up and made her eager to plunge into activism. When a massacre of students trying to open the university system to the poor was not reported in the news, Miles became passionate about discovering the difference between official stories and reality. She became distrustful of all kinds of dogma. Because she had always loved to write, she became a journalist, despite being "unprepared professionally, inexperienced politically, and still an unworthy teenager."

Back in Baltimore, she worked in the kitchens of first-class restaurants, with no idea that feeding people would later become a central part of her life. Neighborhood winos who came to the kitchen doors for food raised her awareness, she says, of the worlds that were outside.



Later, a human rights organization hired her to go to Nicaragua to do research and writing, after the overthrow of a brutal dictatorship, the rise of a

popular revolution, and a counterrevolution funded by the U.S. Next door in El Salvador, similar conflict was growing. Sara yearned to find out more, to connect with these new political movements, and to be back in Latin America. She soon quit her restaurant job, but food remained central for her, for a reason she couldn't quite articulate. "I had no idea then," she writes, "that what I was hungry for was communion."



Total community with others

Over the next 6 years, Miles began to study war, traveling worldwide and reading and interviewing people involved in wars at all levels. "What I learned in those moments of danger and grief," she says, "informs what I now call my Christianity. It was a feeling of total community with others, whether or not I was like them, through the common fact of our mortal bodies. ... In war, I looked at other, different people and saw them, face-to-face, and seeing them, felt a *we*."



"Never was that feeling stronger," Sara Miles reports, "than when people fed me, which they did constantly. ...

Food took on new meaning for me in the war years, as I searched to make meaning amid suffering."

In 1989, she arrived in San Francisco, pregnant and broke. She wound up at a county hospital to get coupons from a government program that would provide her and her baby with milk, cereal, and juice. Her relationship with her baby's father soon ended. She met Martha, a secular Jew who worked at the hospital, and they fell in love and married.

Something outrageous and terrifying

On walks in the Mission district where Sara and her wife and daughter lived, Sara often passed St.

Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church. One day, its striking building and her reporter's habitual curiosity led her to go in, on impulse.

In the large rotunda, communion was in progress. The woman leading it said, "Jesus invites everyone to his table," and Miles accepted the invitation. And as she describes it, "something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me."

Dead white disks and fussy shot glasses

Friends urged her to look around before deciding to connect with St. Gregory's, so for a short while she did. But at the churches she visited, she says, "when it came time to take communion, I was unmoved by the dead white disks of wafers and the fussy little shot glasses full of grape juice, dispensed decorously to parishioners who knelt in line at an altar rail. These were the kinds of churches my parents must have grown up in, I realized: where good manners ruled, the traditional authority of the clergy went unquestioned, and the body of God was draped decorously in an ironed white napkin."



Responsive to a different set of cues

"My background," Sara Miles continues, "had made me responsive to a different set of cues. There was the immediacy of communion at St. Gregory's unmediated by altar rails, the raw physicality of that mystical meal. There was an invitation to jump in, rather than official entrance requirements. There was the suggestion that God could be located in experience, sensed through bodies, tasted in food; that my body was connected literally and mysteriously to other bodies and loved without reason."



Many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Beyond the enclosed museum



“As well as an intimate memoir of personal conversion,” Sara Miles emphasizes, “mine is a political story. At a moment when right-wing American Christianity is ascendant, when religion worldwide is rife with fundamentalism and exclusionary ideological crusades, I stumbled into a radically inclusive faith centered on sacraments and action. What I found wasn’t about angels or going to church or trying to be ‘good’ in a pious, idealized way. It wasn’t about arguing a doctrine ... I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where

everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored. And so I became a Christian, claiming a faith that many of my fellow believers want to exclude me from; following a God my unbelieving friends see as archaic superstition.”

“I wanted so badly to get beyond the tastefully enclosed museum of religious life. I wanted to stand on the kind of holy ground that wasn’t curated by church professionals, where a burning bush could blaze forth in defiance of safety regulations and outside of regular office hours.” Many other Christians apparently want that, too, yet how few of us have the courage to help it happen.

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Connections

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Ash Wednesday reflections

March 2014



An experience that changed everything

“One early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six,” Sara Miles tells in *Take This Bread*, “I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans—except that up until that moment I’d led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything.”

“I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I’d experienced. I started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and bread and cereal around the same altar where I’d first received the body of Christ. ... My new vocation didn’t turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sunday, folding my hands in the pews, and declaring myself ‘saved.’ Nor did my volunteer church work mean talking kindly to poor folks and handing them the occasional sandwich from a safe distance. I had to trudge in the rain through housing projects, sit on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man, stick a battered woman’s .357 Magnum in a cookie tin in the trunk of my car. I had to struggle with my atheist family, my doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of my newfound church. ... Mine is a personal story of an unexpected and terribly inconvenient Christian conversion, told by a very unlikely convert: a blue-state, secular intellectual, a lesbian, a left-wing journalist with a habit of skepticism.” No matter how unlike Miles’s life and views yours may be, I hope you’ll read her powerful story.