

May 5, 2024
John 15: 9-18
Mayflower UCC
Rev. Susie Hayward

In the resistance is the joy (if you're doing it right)

I want to tell you about a woman in Colombia, Sister Norma Ines Bernal. This is a woman I met over a decade ago, when Colombia was still mired in its longtime war with the leftist guerilla movement the FARC – with whom the government has since negotiated peace. And with the ELN, with whom it hasn't. And a vast network of paramilitary criminal networks, the BACRIM, who wreak havoc across the country, often in collusion with private foreign corporations that terrorize local communities as they steal Colombia's precious resources. Some five decades of unrelenting political violence that's morphed into criminal violence, domestic violence, so much violence. And in this crucible, on the outskirts of Bogota in what some refer to as a slum, lived Sister Norma Ines, with a big laugh and a loud voice that seemed to carry the wind rather than be carried by it. Norma was unrelenting. She was insistent in her commitment to the good news, the power of peace. She refused to grant the upper hand to the powerful forces of violence, machismo, or exploitation in Colombia. Nor to the powerful forces of despair, fear, grief, and exhaustion they bred among her people.

Norma Ines, she would burst into any room, her voice high and singing, an uncontainable, unbelievable, against-all-odds joy and warmth and strength just busting out of her. Every email she sent me was written in all caps: yelling greetings and signing off with shouted abrazos. She – like so many other Colombian women whose peacebuilding work I supported during my tenure with the US Institute of Peace – worked hard. At our workshops in monastic settings in the hills, she was up before dawn, leading the charge to meet the rising sun with song. And every night, long after the sun went down, she'd be dancing – shaking her hips to Juanes and Shakira or slow dancing to cheesy Latin ballads with other Catholic sisters, a soft smile on her lips. And in between song and dance, the long strategizing sessions. Sleeves up, brow furrowed, map furled out in front of her, plotting the resistance to worldly forces of violence around her, plotting the nonviolent love revolution led by her Ecumenical Women's Peacebuilding Network, GemPaz.

Sister Norma Ines died on April 22nd, from cancer. And so this sermon is my ode, offered in her honor.

And it's an ode not just to Norma Ines, but to so many women – especially women of color – who have taught me what it means to resist violence with joy, to embody a good news gospel, to create heaven now rather than waiting until you're dead, as the way to peace. This is an ode to Norma Ines in Colombia and to her co-conspirators Sister Maritze, who always carries candles in her purse in case of emergency ritual need, and to solemn, lovely, strong Jenny. This is an ode to Dishani in Sri Lanka with her big visions, who is able to challenge monks when no one else will; to spirited and confident Pastor Esther in Nigeria, and here in the US, this is an ode to Audre Lorde and Mahalia Jackson and Bree Newsome. And, finally, it's an ode to Mary Magdalene, the first person to preach good news after Jesus's death – who also happened to be a woman of color.

This is my ode to the joy that these women preached in word and action. A particular kind of joy. I think you know what I mean, Mayflower. Because I'm not talking here about the saccharine, indulgent, consumerized "joy" that is packaged and sold by Lululemon. It's not the happiness

promised to us by retail therapy, or perfect teeth, or fancy spa days. Nor is it the contentment promised by stress-based mindfulness meditation that is embraced by Google to help employees bear the brunt of capitalist grind. What I *don't* mean is joy as means to endure violent systems that wear down and destroy our bodies and psyches and spirits and communities. A false joy that breeds complacency. The joy packaged and sold to you by the world as a means to pacify, or to make money. I mean something else.

Have you ever experienced the joy that comes from solidarity, resistance, struggle for justice? From linking arms with folks across generations and races – people you may have just met but with whom you have quickly become soul siblings in the struggle for love?

I have, sometimes in the darkest places. In 2017, I was in Charlottesville, VA when heavily armed militia and white supremacists flooded the city. I was present in the immediate aftermath of the attack by car, as Heather Heyer took her last breaths. I heard, saw, and received forms of anti-women, anti-queer, antisemitic, racist insult slung like weapons by the white men gathered under neo-Nazi flags. I watched supremacists violently rush a line of our unarmed multifaith clergy who were singing, with locked arms, having gathered from across the country to stand in faithful witness against hate. That day – August 12, 2017 -- I saw ugliness, hate, violence, and death – forces ever present in the world, and this country, ask any woman or person of color – but one that was unmasked and unleashed that day in full view, unapologetic.

And, would you believe me if I told you I also saw and experienced heaven that day in Charlottesville, and a deep joy that's not happiness, but another quality altogether? It moved in the sanctuary where the clergy gathered with activists from Black Lives Matter and Standing Up for Racial Justice, in our safe spaces of refuge throughout the day where we sang, and prayed, where we read scripture that resonated so deeply it made me cry, where we checked in with each other and dared to laugh even in the midst of horror. I saw it in those resisting – those of all races, faiths, generations, genders, and sexualities – an Indigenous two-spirit elder who traveled from Tennessee, a New Jersey rabbinical student in *kippa* and *tillit* prayer shawl, Cornel West and Traci Blackmon, and so many Christian women in collars – gender non-conforming and cis, white, Black, queer, straight. And in our leader Rev. Sekou, with his long dreads and propensity – like Sister Norma -- to break into song at any moment. Rev. Sekou who drew on a long history of showing up in the crucibles of violence – in Ferguson and Beirut and New Orleans post-Katrina -- to lead nonviolent, compassion grounded, song-infused, movements of revolutionary love. In the resistance that day, I saw a glimpse of heaven: beloved community, mutual aid, collective care and liberation, solidarity, song, and a deep and abiding joy that stood in distinction from the hate and anger and violence we were confronting. That resisted it. That's what I'm talking about, Mayflower. And that's what Sister Norma Ines embodied in her work for just peace; the complete joy Jesus speaks of in the passage we read today, that comes from laying your life down for one another in love. Lululemon has no idea.

What Norma and so many other women peace activists have taught me, is this: there is a connection between resistance and joy, when both are truly of God, who is Love. They've taught me that joy IS resistance against a world bent on destroying so much of what is good. Consider Mary Magdalene, the first follower of Jesus to experience joy and preach good news after his death. A woman trampled and battered by patriarchy and imperial violence in her own time and throughout the history of a certain stream of male-privileged Christian interpretation that has often downplayed her role as an apostle, sought to demean her by calling her a prostitute. Mary who stayed and watched as Jesus died, and to whom Jesus first appeared after his death. Mary, the first he instructed to go out and preach to others the good news – the joy -- she experienced upon confronting the Risen One. And I think as well of the

late great Black lesbian scholar Audre Lorde, who wrote about the capacity and urgent need for all people – women especially, but surely all oppressed groups - to mine through the layers of socially constructed barriers and socially inflicted despair to experience joy– one that she writes will make us “give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like [the] only alternative in our society” ... that will “give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world.”¹ And so, a joy that the world does and should find dangerous. What good news is this that we might receive from these women – Mary and Audre and Norma - who do not claim such joy lightly – women who know precisely the enormity of violence and injustice that we defenders of Love are up against in this world? And who say and show nonetheless that joy is available and necessary, even in the midst of brokenness – just as we’re taught at the communion table. I believe these women when they preach joy.

And they’ve taught me something else too. Joy is resistance... and resistance is joy, when it’s done right, when it reflects the ends we dream and yearn for. So – do we yearn for equity, love abiding, the marginalized centered, all peoples’ needs tended to, a world where hate in all its forms is eradicated? Well then, our activism must exorcise hate in all forms, it must center the marginalized, it must *be* love abiding. We cannot use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, Audre Lorde reminds us.² This kind of resistance is love, linked arms, singing, dancing, in the face of hate, to fight back the forces trying to demean or destroy you, while in caring relationship with others, and it will give you an experience of heaven – the kingdom already arriving among us. It will bring joy. We don’t experience this – or at least I have not -- when our activism is rooted in self-righteousness, in hate, in any form of domination, in anything other than joy. That kind of activism is not sustainable, much less helpful in building just peace. Our efforts for just peace must reflect the ends we seek. And you’ll know it’s so when the activism brings joy, when it softens you rather than hardens you – carrying you out of hopelessness, and “inviting you into a world of our own remaking,” as Cole Arthur Riley describes it.³ The kind that has nuns shaking their hips to Shakira late into the night, after a long day of advocating on the streets.

A final word. This past week, I visited two encampments of student anti-war activists – one at the University of Minnesota and the other at Harvard. What I saw was very different from what the media has conveyed. I saw arts and crafts, mutual aid, low-key soccer, music, faculty on the outskirts providing accompaniment and witness, incredible diversity, much Jewish and Muslim religious expression, laughter, shared meals, spiritual chaplains on call, community guidelines banning discrimination, hate, alcohol or drugs. I saw an image of what the Holy Land could be, Muslims and Arab Christians and Jews coming together, with others, in a shared space declared off limits to violence and hate, accountable to and protecting one another. I know some of the students involved in these actions, some of those at Harvard are my former students; I know they are learning along the way about how to protest, to resist, in ways that do not drive hate, nor reinforce binary, simplistic narratives. They are not perfect – what movement ever has been? But they are seeking to create in those spaces of resistance to war and occupation the kind of beloved community they envision for the world, a space of community care and solidarity, of constant learning and unlearning, of play and joy and ideals of justice and peace for

¹ Audre Lorde. “Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, Berkley, CA, 2007) xx.

² Audre Lorde. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Ibid.*

³ Cole Arthur Riley. *Black Liturgies: prayers, poems, and meditations for staying human* (New York: Convergent Press, 2024) 164.

all, even as they are demonized by the media and politicians and university administrators, even as they face the threat – and in some cases the reality -- of state violence and incarceration. The majority of these students -- they are glimpsing something of what it means to experience the joy of laying your life down for your friends (and, they are learning something of what Jesus meant when he said the world will hate them for it).

Thanks be to God for the fruit that endures – the lessons taught to us by prophets, activists, all the Normas who've been, who are, and who will be. Thanks be to God for the joy that sustains and that transforms us and the world.

Amen

Benediction: In the fight against oppression in all its forms, may joy protect us, sustain us, guide us. Beloved, go now into the world with joy, so that we might all be free. Amen.

Quote: "Unlike happiness, joy is a lasting state that can be sustained even when everything is not the way we want it to be." — bell hooks

Question of the week: What have you learned about heaven from activism?