



Congregational Ministry in Time of Crisis: The Katie Poirier Case

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WRITING FOR AN AUDIENCE OVER THIRTY YEARS AGO, THEOLOGIAN ARTHUR McGill observed: “For our age violent suffering is not seen as just one of the many inevitabilities of life with which people must learn to live. It is felt to be the scandal that threatens to undermine all confidence in the decent values that make life possible.”¹ Certainly McGill’s assessment rings as true for today’s world as it did then, perhaps even more so. Throughout the summer of 1999, such a scandal of violence cast its shadow over the greater Moose Lake community following the apparently random abduction and murder of one of our own.

Moose Lake, a quintessential northern Minnesota town (population 1,700), is a popular summer destination for people seeking a getaway. The local population surges as its summer residents retreat to their lake cabins and homes. On May

¹Arthur C. McGill, *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 21.

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Hope Lutheran Church’s response to the abduction and murder of Katie Poirier is an example of congregational ministry grounded in a trinitarian theology of the cross that enables a generous spirit of service to others.

26, 1999, as the summer population began to climb, Katie Poirier, a 19-year-old woman, disappeared from the Moose Lake convenience store where she had been working the late-night shift. Surveillance cameras provided grainy footage from the night's events showing a man who had grabbed the young woman by the neck and was forcing her out of the store. Within thirty minutes of the abduction, after a customer arrived to find an empty store and no clerk in sight, police were called to the scene. Immediately that night a search for the young woman began, a search that was to continue the entire summer. Daily, from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day, in cold rains and in summer heat, scores of people converged on Moose Lake not only for vacation getaways but also to assist in the search efforts for Katie Poirier. Unlike Hollywood images of vengeful torch-wielding mobs, this collective nonviolent posse of searchers faithfully trekked through tick-infested fields, forests, and swamps often swarming with black flies and mosquitoes. The bitter fate of the one for whom they searched was quietly assumed, even as we all hoped against hope.

Meanwhile, three and a half weeks after the abduction, a 50-year-old man with a history of abductions and sexual offenses was arrested for kidnapping Katie. On September 8, 1999, as a part of a plea bargain agreement, this man confessed to the kidnapping and murder of Katie Poirier. He has since recanted his confession, and a state trial began in June of 2000.

I. THE ROLE OF HOPE LUTHERAN CHURCH

Our congregation, Hope Lutheran Church, is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation of 850 baptized members. We became directly involved with the search efforts by chance. During the first 24 hours, our community was in a state of stunned paralysis. By the second day, however, people were looking for ways to help and be involved. As another local congregation organized a prayer vigil for that evening, at Hope we received a phone call earlier in the day from a friend of Katie's family, loosely connected with our congregation, asking whether our church facility could be used as a clearinghouse where interested people could call and volunteer to help and search. Our response was an immediate yes.

The implications of this yes began on a small scale with one relative of the Poirier family sitting in the church office taking phone calls. Soon after a request was made for bag lunches for the searchers who worked with law enforcement officials, our social hall became a storage center filled with donated food, water, and other needed supplies. When law enforcement officials called off the official search, family members and committed volunteers continued to organize searchers on their own, working out of our church. In this way Hope Lutheran became the control center for the searchers and the Poirier family.

Because the volunteer headquarters was based at our church, we were undoubtedly given more credit than deserved by the media and general public. The volunteers were not limited to our membership; the Volunteers for Katie included

many family friends as well as complete strangers from all over the region and even the country. Area businesses generously donated food, bottled water, rain gear, and numerous other supplies. The community's response to the tragedy was both poignant and overwhelming. Although Hope Lutheran's part was unplanned and only part of the larger picture, we do believe that our congregation's involvement made a unique contribution to the efforts. Beyond the offering of hospitality, phones, kitchen facilities, a physical and spiritual sanctuary, and the active participation of Hope members as volunteers, we, as a community of faith, were in a unique position to interpret this tragedy and shape the community's response.

II. A RESPONSE TO EVIL

Radical evil, like the murder of Katie Poirier, remains inexplicable.² What would impel a man to abduct and murder someone as vibrant and kindly as Katie Poirier? No merely empirical explanation quite thoroughly accounts for the egregious ugliness of such a deed. No less mysterious, however, is the blossoming forth of a collective commitment on the part of hundreds and hundreds of people, a commitment not merely to an abstraction like "justice," but to a long and arduous search for a person whom initially very few of us even knew. What is more, this ongoing response unfolded in an age in which ever more persons—even churchfolk—increasingly detach from the demands of others as they immerse themselves within a cocoon of self-centered preoccupations.

Contemporary social theorists speak of this mood that suffuses our age as postmodern. The "postmodern self," as it is termed, characterizes persons who live in the aftermath of the Promethean modern project: lofty in its ameliorative goals and so tragic in its violent, indeed, genocidal track record. Early warnings of a now widespread suspicion, resentment, and outright nihilism were prophetically uttered by nineteenth-century writers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky.³ As the twenty-first century begins, even in seemingly idyllic and peaceable places like Moose Lake, one detects evidence of the bleak theorizing of contemporary thinkers like Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Girard at the level of lived experience: dairy farmers reflecting on inequities in price-support, millworkers grumbling about the ennui of the assembly line, correctional workers contending with a

²To use the language of Gabriel Marcel, radical evil is a "mystery" rather than a "problem." "A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I myself am involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and its initial validity. A genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined; whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends every possible technique." See Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Henry Regnery, Gateway Edition, 1964) 260.

³See René Girard, *Resurrection From the Underground: Fyodor Dostoevsky* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1995), for a chilling account of how Dostoevsky in particular imaginatively anticipated the current mood of resentment, the attack upon values that Nietzsche termed "*ressentiment*," a key concept in postmodern thought.

“control society”⁴ that appears capricious and mean-spirited, if not outright inhumane. Though their rhetoric is pungent and plain, their suspicion of overarching metanarratives may at times prove to be no less intense than that of the most disaffected postmodern individual. Commenting on the volatile temper of the present times, Anthony Thiselton observes, “[I]f the modern self is content to say, ‘*That’s life,*’ the postmodern self assumes the discourse of accusation and conflict: ‘*It’s them.*’ ...At all events, blame, accusation and hostility come to absorb the concern of the postmodern self.”⁵

In a postmodern climate like this, what would move these thousands of whom we have spoken to give up their vacation leisure and to commit to a cause for which no “happy ending” was likely? Moreover, what would inspire a congregation in a way that to us seemed spontaneous and uncoerced to turn its facilities over to this search without complaint, thirst for glory, or hope for recompense, for as long as the need remained?

III. THE CROSS AND THE TRINITY

As we grapple with how to interpret this response, at the center of it all stands the cross, the place of God’s self-identification with scandalous suffering. In our preaching, prayers, and words of counsel and support, we continually spoke of our God who is with us even in suffering; our God who in Jesus Christ fully entered into the fray of human life and experienced the very powers of hatred, fear, and violence. Through self-giving love and service, God in Christ has freed us from those forces that oppress us and has revealed God’s enduring love for us.⁶ And so, central to our interpretation of the events of last summer was our understanding of the way of the cross and the in-breaking of eschatological reality, both rooted in a foundational theology of the cross and a related theology of inner-trinitarian relationship.

Contemporary theological reflection on the mystery of God’s triune identity relates this theology of the cross to an ethic of compassion and, what is more, an ethos of nonviolent reconciliation with the other, formerly perceived as rival, threat, or scapegoat. Contemporary Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann gives witness to this movement.

Christian identification with the crucified Christ means solidarity with the sufferings of the poor and the misery both of the oppressed and the oppressors. On the one hand, if this solidarity is seriously accepted, selflessly and without re-

⁴“And, now, another transition is taking place. This transition is not complete, but it began shortly after WWII. In this new society, which we can call the society of control, the closed environments (i.e., schools, factories) are giving way to different forms of power. These control societies control the population with new technologies, molecular engineering, genetic manipulation, and so forth.” Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *OCTOBER* 59 (Winter 1992) 3-7. Cited online: <http://www.california.com/~rathbone/deleuze.htm>.

⁵Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 131.

⁶McGill, *Suffering*, 79.

serve, it is in itself an identification with the one who was crucified and “became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (II Cor. 8:9). By alienating the believer from the compulsions and the automatic assumptions of an alienated world, Christian identification with the crucified necessarily brings him [*sic*] into solidarity with the alienated of this world, with the dehumanized and the inhuman. But this solidarity becomes radical only if it imitates the identification of the crucified Christ with the abandoned, accepts the suffering of creative love, and is not led astray by its own dreams of omnipotence in an illusory future.⁷

Emerging from a theology of the cross, and rooted in ancient reflection upon the Holy Trinity, the concept of perichoresis sheds helpful light on how it is that an “ordinary” small-town congregation could be moved beyond the predictable turf disputes or apathetic self-absorption to that spate of self-donative activities under discussion. In speaking of the Holy Trinity, liberation theologian Leonardo Boff defines perichoresis as the “the permanent interpenetration, the eternal co-relatedness, the self-surrender of each Person to the others....In the Trinity all is perichoretic: union, love, hypostatic relationships.”⁸

Approaching the matter from a post-Barthian and postmodern perspective, Miroslav Volf further refines this ancient notion as “the reciprocal interiority of the trinitarian persons. In every divine person as a subject, the other persons also indwell; all mutually permeate one another, though in so doing they do not cease to be distinct persons.”⁹ From the fundamental mystery, Volf develops a “perichoretic” understanding of the missional church: a church that embodies for the sake of the other—and hence, the world—the self-giving love intrinsic to the Trinity.

In other words, the church—at whatever level of expression—remains the church insofar as in response to the Triune God, who is intrinsically the God for Others, the church remains the church for Others.¹⁰ Volf spells out what this means missionally and ethically:

It is not the mutual perichoresis of human beings, but rather the indwelling of the Spirit common to everyone that makes the church into a communion corresponding to the Trinity, a communion in which personhood and sociality are equi-primal.¹¹

Hence, implicit within any congregation defined and animated by word and sacrament and by mutual consolation in the name of the Crucified One lies a comparable perichoretic response to the pangs of human need.¹² “Since the trinity is

⁷Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 24-25.

⁸Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Tunbridge Wells, UK: Burns and Oates, 1988) 5.

⁹Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 209.

¹⁰See Gregory Baum, *The Church for Others: Protestant Theology in Communist East Germany* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); chapter 6, “Barmen and Bonhoeffer’s Radical Theology,” is particularly helpful.

¹¹Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 213.

¹²For a fuller discussion of the “perichoretic, hospitable self,” see Robert Vosloo, “Being Created in the Image of the Triune God: The Trinity and Human Personhood,” *Theological Forum* 27/1 & 2 (July 1999). Cited online: <http://gospelcom.net/rec/TF-July99vosloo.html>.

unbounded self-giving love each to the other, always seeking the best for the other and receiving back love in return, and since the church's mission grows out of the overflow of this love, the church's mission is to all people. But in the incarnation Jesus Christ becomes the suffering trinity, and thus the Father and the Spirit have particular compassion for him in his sufferings."¹³

As a community of faith constituted and defined by God's self-giving love on the cross and given our understanding of perichoresis, we emphasized a call to the way of the cross. Our congregation's involvement and commitment in the search for Katie last summer surprised several members of the media. They were curious about our motivations and wondered what was in it for us. But this calling comes not by choice; it is to be a way of life for the Christian community, reflective of God's suffering and inner-relationship. As a community gathered around the cross, our calling is to participate in God's response to suffering in this world. We do not simply confess this as a foundational truth of our faith, but we also engage in acts of compassion motivated by this biblical and theological witness.¹⁴ We recognize that God has indeed called us to be a community that exists for the other, to be a people of the cross who respond to and suffer with and for the world.¹⁵ "Because it is the crucified and risen Jesus Christ whom it follows, the church cannot but be involved in the alleviation of human suffering."¹⁶

Because the way of the cross is a call through the Spirit of the Triune God, we in this congregation were equipped for that way of living and suffering. During this long summer, we were equipped by grace. We received a capacity for serving and suffering that was beyond ourselves.¹⁷ Hope Lutheran was called not because we were especially prepared for such involvement and leadership, nor were we called because we were a perfect Christian community. The efforts by those involved were not something we inspired, organized, or mobilized. Rather, we were called to bear witness to and participate in the unfolding of God's power, grace, and love at work in and through our community. We were handed no detailed script of what we should do, but we simply appealed to one another to live faithfully under the cross of the Crucified One. Empowered and emboldened by God's power of love "made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9), we were gifted for service and suffering.

¹³Howard A. Snyder, "The Trinitarian Nature of the Missional Church," *The Gospel and Our Culture: Encouraging the Encounter in North America* 10/1 (March 1998). Cited online: <http://www.gocn.org/news101.htm>.

¹⁴Harold Dean Trulear, "Go and Do Likewise: The Church's Role in Caring for Crime Victims," in *God and the Victim*, ed. Lisa Barnes Lampman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 71. This chapter is one of several powerful essays collected by *Neighbors Who Care*, the crime-victim ministry of Prison Fellowship Ministries, for publication. This helpful book explores both the theological and practical ministerial responses to the multifaceted issues surrounding crime and its victims.

¹⁵Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 141.

¹⁶Winston D. Persaud, "The Cross of Jesus Christ, the Unity of the Church, and Human Suffering," in *The Scandal of a Crucified World*, ed. Yacob Tesfai (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) 111.

¹⁷Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 142.

IV. STEWARDS OF HOPE

Rooted in our identity as people of the cross, in communion with the Triune God, our community was called not only to suffer with Katie's family and the volunteers; we were also called to be stewards of hope. Hope was much more than the name of our congregation; hope, infused with eschatological promise, was the very power to endure this tragedy. This eschatological hope saturated our community's worship and prayer life with the conviction that something radically new has happened in the history of the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That the kingdom of God has broken into human history for both renewal and transformation of the present filled us with hope and expectation for the time when God will reign on earth as in heaven. Among the people of Hope Lutheran and the volunteers, we were indeed a community buoyed by a deep sense of hope, a hope not in present conditions and circumstances, but in the anticipation of the fullness of God's Spirit among us.

In particular, this hope was centered on the power of love over the forces of violence and evil. We clung to the promise that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:39). Those who attended the final community-wide prayer service and Katie's memorial service can attest that these gatherings did not gloss over the pain, nor did they issue a call for bloody revenge. Instead, God's promises were spoken so that those gathered would find solace and encouragement in them.

While making arrangements for Katie's memorial service, her father Steve shared with us these words that point to the hope that comes from the power of God's promises:

A day or two after this [Katie's abduction] happened, Hope Lutheran had a small prayer service at about 8:30 pm. Pam and I knew nothing about it; there were only about 20 or 30 people there. We arrived late, about 8:45 pm, and sat in the back. I was sobbing uncontrollably. Then I looked up at the Cross, and it was like a slap across the face. A sense of peace came over me, and I knew that everything was okay, no matter what. I'm still going to cry and miss her, but I know she's OK.

The breaking in of the kingdom of God with its power of hope generated proclamation of a crucified God who radically self-identifies with the world's suffering and the profound anguish of this particular family and community. The promised future of God's final victory over those powers of hate and violence that will be won without rage and revenge made such proclamation possible. Without that hopeful promise, this proclamation would have been in vain.

Although the day-to-day activities of the volunteer headquarters that operated out of Hope Lutheran are over, our congregation's involvement continues through ongoing support and prayers for Katie's family, especially as they endure the trial of her accused murderer. Not only does our congregation offer love and prayers, we continue to be active in an ongoing nonviolent response to Katie's abduction and

murder through legislative advocacy work and educational efforts against violence, while we remain stewards both of Katie's story and of the promise of hope.

V. ADVOCACY AND EDUCATION

Hope Lutheran was involved in advocacy before the Minnesota State Legislature to pass a bundle of related bills—collectively to be known as the Katie Poirier Law. These bills addressed a wide range of issues centering upon the tracking, apprehension, and conviction of patterned sex offenders. A more public sign of our advocacy work was the “March of Hope,” which members of this congregation played a key role in organizing. The march, held on January 28, 2000, was led by the families who have lost loved ones to sexual violence or abduction in the course of the past decade. Beginning at the St. Paul Cathedral, the marchers—hundreds in number—trooped down John Ireland Boulevard behind a sign that read, “NEVER AGAIN,” as they proceeded to the rotunda of the Minnesota State Capitol. There, at an ecumenical prayer vigil, the names of the victims were read as family members placed white carnations on the Minnesota state seal.

The invocation that opened this vigil epitomizes the spirit of the search for Katie as well as the quest for Katie's Law:

God of Compassion, God of Hope, we gather before you in this time of decision, mindful of our human frailty and need. Confused and sad, angry and perplexed, we call on you for wisdom and grace. Where our silence would allow crisis to deepen and injustice to remain unchecked, awaken within these very corridors deliverers who have insight and strength. Give us, in turn, the courage to speak out and the restraint to listen, that even in the darkness of a world beset by the ravages of sexual violence, we would discern your truth and hold its light aloft. Bless this vigil and the healing work for which our wounded souls cry out. Hasten the day when our cry of hope, “NEVER AGAIN!” becomes the very truth in which all women and men will walk and live. Amen.

The Twin Cities news media were generous in their coverage, thereby generating broad-based public support for legislative efforts that in a non-funding fiscal year would mean well over a million dollars in additional appropriations. Scores of Hope members sent out thousands of mailings and e-mail messages alerting the public to this ongoing ministry of advocacy. Ultimately, after months of hearings, Governor Ventura signed the Katie Poirier Law.

In addition to our legislative work, our congregation has also been involved in educational efforts. Hope Lutheran graciously blessed the efforts of Pastor Owen Christianson in forming a cell-group of men trained to address other men in a variety of settings on the matter of sexual violence and how it can be diminished. Appropriate to its present size and scope, the cell-group was dubbed NUCLEUS: Northlanders United to Coordinate, Listen, Educate and Undo Sexual Violence. The Duluth advocacy group PAVSA (Program to Aid Victims of Sexual Assault) offered free of charge a four-month series of training sessions on the dynamics of sexual violence.

Even as these efforts have been underway, we sense that our long-term calling

will be as bearers of the story: Katie's story of tragedy, and that in the context of God's story of hope.

Pamela Cooper-White, in her comprehensive study of violence against women, *The Cry of Tamar*, calls upon the church to reexamine the excluded voices of Scripture, often women who are the victims of violence. Cooper-White suggests that one crucial element in stopping violence and abuse is simply to hear such stories from the viewpoint of the victim, the abused, and the oppressed, and then to remember and retell these stories.¹⁸

Along the interstate south of Moose Lake, a billboard with Katie's picture offers a word of thanks to the volunteers and then reminds us, "Don't forget Katie." Violence against women is not uncommon in our world or in Scripture, yet unfortunately these stories are often not publicly acknowledged. Katie's story was exceptional in the extraordinary amount of coverage it received in the state of Minnesota and beyond. Because of this exposure, as we remember Katie and lament her fate, we will also be speaking out against violence endured by countless, nameless others. By telling Katie's story, by refusing to forget her, we will be honoring the stories of others like her. Through this truthful acknowledgement of the violence in our society, we will be empowered to practice and model nonviolence in our own lives as well as advocate for necessary legislation to create a safer and more secure society.

As a community of faith gathered under the cross in the name of the Triune God, we know that our calling is greater than remembering and truth telling. Even as we remember and speak truthfully of tragedy and suffering, we are ultimately called to speak out truthfully in hope. Called to participate in the very life of God, we are the bearers of a message of hope. For even in the midst of the scandal of violence, as we point to the cross of shame and suffering, we are able to look from this tragedy and identify our experience of God's love, ever anticipating the final manifestation of this love's power.

VI. AFTERWORD

Following Sunday morning worship on May 28, 2000, a flowering crab apple tree was planted on the front lawn of Hope Lutheran Church. The dedicatory prayer called upon the Triune God to "bless the work of healing you have called us all to pursue." As we stood together in the warm sun of springtime and yet, in the very shadow of the cross, we linked arms and sang the same song with which both Katie's memorial service and the prayer vigil held at the Minnesota State Capitol had concluded: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."* ⊕

¹⁸Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 14.

*Editor's note: On August 16, 2000, Donald Blom, a convicted sex offender, was found guilty of kidnapping and killing Katie Poirier and then incinerating her body. The conviction carries a mandatory sentence of life without parole. Under Minnesota law an appeal in such a case is automatic. In the aftermath of this case, Pastor Owen Christianson has resigned his call to Hope Lutheran Church and accepted a position in Minneapolis as program manager for the Alliance for Speaking the Truth on Prostitution.