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Author Sara Miles reflects on Ash Wednesday

Jamie Manson | Mar. 5, 2014 Grace on the Margins

In her new book *City of God*, Sara Miles offers an extended reflection on her experience offering ashes outdoors in the Mission District of San Francisco on Ash Wednesday of 2012. Miles? writing first appeared in the religious landscape with her 2008 book *Take This Bread*, which recounts her sudden and stunning conversion to Christianity and her subsequent creation of a food pantry at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. In *City of God* Miles not only explores the power of offering ashes to strangers in a very public setting, she also offers a meditation on cities, where, she writes, ?grace just falls all over the place.? During a stop on her recent book tour, I had the chance to sit with Miles for a brief interview.

Manson: Anyone who has ever distributed ashes realizes quickly that ashes hold a unique power for people. How would you describe the significance of ashes?

Miles: Ashes are a sign of our common mortality. It?s not a sign of initiation into the church. Ashes say, ?You?re born and you?re going to die,? and that?s powerful for people. The act of giving ashes is an incredibly intimate moment. You?re touching the skin of somebody who is going to die with your skin, which is going to die, too. It?s very deep. And you?re also telling the truth. You?re saying that you actually can?t buy your way to living forever. So much of our culture is structured on the false idea that if you buy this or that product you?ll live forever. That?s why offering ashes is very radical and beautiful, and sometimes it makes you cry. It?s a good thing to do at least once a year: to be in public with other people and tell the truth by admitting that we?re not in control.

How has an outdoor distribution of ashes changed your understanding of the church?

God meets God?s people all over the place: by the side of a lake, in a city square, an upstairs room, a manger, a burning bush, a human body. The idea that liturgy should only happen inside church buildings is fairly recent: in fact, faith is practiced everywhere, in homes and public places as well as in temples. Taking ashes outdoors is just one example of contemporary worship beyond the building: you could also look at street churches, unhoused congregations, outdoor processions and vigils.

Would it be fair to say that you're "bringing church to the people"?

I?m hardly ?bringing? church to the people: church is already among us. People bring their own relationships with God, their theologies and practices into a larger conversation, only some of which takes places on Sundays inside church buildings. And I?m hardly bringing the Divine to the streets: the Divine is already there. Offering

ashes outside means seeing and listening to and interacting with others? faith, being a witness to all the different relationships people have with God.

So, if God?s presence is everywhere and in the lives of everyone, what is the role of the church and its ministers?

The church and its ministers can make visible a sign of God's presence. And many different kinds of things can be signs of God's presence, but it takes paying attention. What I write about in *City of God* is how paying attention, in church services and outside of them, is a spiritual discipline. Some people pay attention better in the city, some pay better attention on top of a mountain. But I think that there is always the possibility of trying to pay better attention to what is happening with the people around you.

In your book you talk about a new vision of the "heavenly city." Is that what you see on Ash Wednesday?

Being out in the streets of my city on Ash Wednesday is a way for me to glimpse a little bit of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world. Almost always, in the knocking together of unlikely people, in unexpected encounters, I see much more holiness than I?d see if I stayed indoors.

Some theologians believe that the future of the church is outside the walls of the church. Is that what you are envisioning?

I?m not trying to present the latest new fix for the church. This book isn?t about how we can improve the church experience. What I?m interested in is helping people pay attention to their lives, and giving them the tools to be able to do midrash on their lives in community, rather than simply in some kind of isolated, spiritualized way.

Would you say that what you?re doing is a form of evangelization?

We have been shy about evangelization. Part of the reason, of course, is the church?s centuries of ugly history with it. I think evangelization should involve listening to the Spirit in other people, and seeking the truth about what?s real in your own life. It?s not a one way street. I don?t think you can be an evangelist without allowing yourself to be evangelized. It?s about paying attention and allowing myself to be transformed, in the belief that God is always making things new ? and not necessarily in the way I think God should do it.

A full review of City of God [1] *can be found here[1].*

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/71896