

The Rev. Nicholas Myers
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This past week I met a woman named Monica Vega.

We met in Estes Park, CO far from her current home in Ilinge, South Africa. We met at an Episcopal Conference on mission.

Monica is a woman who decided to join the work of the Holy Cross Monastery, an Anglican Benedictine community in Grahamstown, South Africa.

I don't know the entirety of her background, but she was born and raised in Argentina.

Now, I hesitate to call her a missionary because she herself did not identify as such, but rather as a follower of Christ, a disciple of Christ.

Monica, along with her partner in mission, Heidi, help run Isibindi.

In Zulu, Isibindi means "courage". And it is a community full of courage.

At Isibindi, Monica trains women who are part of the National Association of Child Care Workers in South Africa in order to offer them the skills to be able to go back to their local communities and offer care to children living in households affected by HIV/AIDS—children who have been orphaned.

Monica and these women care for the vulnerable and orphaned children in their homes.

One thing I learned about Monica last week is that she is very humble, to the point of untruth. You see, she describes what she does as "nothing much". But she and 51 other people care for over 3,400-orphaned children.

That is not "nothing much".

In fact, it is the love of which our Lord speaks today: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...Love your neighbor as yourself.”

This is real tough love; love that doesn't seek to bend the world towards its own needs, but instead, embrace all that is before it. This is the love of God—an all embracing, endless source of goodness and life.

Theologically, Monica says that the life of Isibindi is based upon something that is within each human being: the presence of God. Functionally, she says the presence of God is manifested as: “courage”.

And the program is successful, not because it provides aid or charity (a word far too often associated with love), but because it empowers others to learn new skills and care for one another. The program actually enables people to love one another more fully, more completely, more endlessly because everyone supports one another.

“God's love,” she said, “is God's mission. And we,” referring to those interested in mission, “we are moving to encounter our God, who is present already in others, our neighbors.”

Now, this might surprise you, but God's primary work is in the world, not the church. That is, God comes to us, not for the sake of the Church, but for the redemption and reconciliation of the world.

In fact, the coming of the Christ is God's telling the world that God will not stay put. That God will go where God pleases, to accomplish his mission of love, reconciliation, redemption, and life.

So, let me state this one more time: God's mission is the redemption and reconciliation of the world, not the church.

God comes to call the sick, not the healthy; God comes to embrace the world in the face of rejection; God comes to transform the world and is, transformed through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Often, our Gospel reading from today is understood in ethical and moral terms. That is, the form and measure of God's action in Christ provides the model for Christian moral action: "love your neighbor as yourself".

This is good and right. But there is more to this.

There is more to simply being in solidarity with the poor, the stranger, the oppressed, those in need. You see, there is more than simply looking to the life of Jesus for how we should live or imagining the love and unity between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as a way we should love or be unified to one another.

In the command to love God and love neighbor, there is the invitation to and opportunity for something new—what Christians call "grace." You see, today, unexpected love is offered to us by our God and we are invited to participate in the very life of God by loving our neighbor.

How? You might wonder. By loving our neighbor, the other, the person who is different from us or who repulses us—we are participating in the life, the love, the mission of our God.

In turning to our neighbor in love we are invited by God, to participate in God's mission; his mission of love that is shown to us in the life of Jesus.

The very mission of God is defined by God's love, God's decision to come to us, to go toward the other—us, the world, the church—and take us into an infinite embrace.

And this is what defines who we are as Christians. This defines our mission.

Indeed, mission defines the church, the church does not define mission.

And it is God's mission that we have, not our own. God tells us to move, to go toward the other—they who are different from us, but beautiful in their very being.

You see, mission is never planned from a vestry, an outreach committee, or clergy!

Instead, we are given a mission, invited into a mission, the mission of God, which is the reconciliation and redemption of this world.

And let us be clear about this, the mission of God is beyond our programs or schemes for church-growth or social transformation. We are not going to people in need of us; rather, we are in need of them.

Because when we embrace one another we experience an epiphany, the revelation of who we truly are and who our God is and how our God is truly present in every human being.

Sisters and Brothers, who and what are we embracing?

Are we reaching out with our arms open wide or with merely an open palm, perhaps even a clenched fist?

What would our participating in God's mission look like in this city, in this world?

How would we be changed by engaging in relationship and mission with the Church of Southern Sudan, who continues to struggle to build a nation in the absence of government?

How would we be changed by using our hands to embrace the orphaned or abandoned children of Isibindi in South Africa or El Hogar in Honduras?

How would we be changed by embracing the needs of so many in El Paso county?

What if we were to love our neighbors not only as ourselves, but as our God loves each of his creation?

What if we were to love our neighbors as ourselves by founding a medical clinic for the under or un-insured?

What if we were to love our neighbors as ourselves by offering McWilliams house to become Grace House, once again, where those working for the wholeness of Colorado Springs could call home? Perhaps where 20-30 year olds from throughout the Episcopal Church could live in community, in prayer, embracing the needs of Colorado Springs?

What if we were to love our neighbors as ourselves by demanding that for every dollar we spent on ourselves here in this church, we would give another dollar towards the needs of Colorado Springs and the world?

This is the mission we are called to, God's mission in this world—seeking reconciliation and redemption. This is why we exist.

In this time of stewardship, I ask you, not to simply spend your money, but spend your courage, spend your faith—your life, this community, our world will be richer for it.