

It has been a privilege and moment of learning to be in your midst. In chapel, it's very refreshing to hear about water, Sophia, First Nations, and not about Jesus and God so much because they're abused and misused so much anyway. I'm talking about my church in the Philippines. After hearing Miriam Spies, I posted on Facebook that – "She really touched something in me as she struggled to preach the image of a God that intently, patiently and willfully seeks to be truly present..." She responded to my post and commented, "I was not struggling. I enjoyed preaching and being with you all in chapel." So yeah, I will remember that important learning. I've reflected so much about diversity, cultural diversity, sexual diversity, dialogue and imagination. But today, I'm going to talk about communities in the Philippines and a little bit about Jesus.

The lectionary reading for Sunday from the Gospel according to Mark is preceded by Jesus's foretelling of his death and resurrection. He says, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; <sup>34</sup> they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." Thus, when I reflected initially on James and John's words to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you," I thought it exhibited the depth of their relationship with Jesus and their commitment to discipleship. I thought, perhaps, this was preceding a courageous declaration of their vow to stand with Jesus even unto death, which they suspected Jesus would not allow them to do. After all, these were said in the context of the Roman Empire where Jesus's preaching of the "Kingdom of God" was a direct critique to the Kingdom of Rome. To follow Jesus meant being the target of persecution and even death. But when they said, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory," it reveals the failure of the two men to understand Jesus's messiahship, Jesus as the "suffering servant." Because to follow Jesus is a lot of things,

and ‘to sit in glory’ was not one of them. In the first chapter of Mark alone, after his baptism, Jesus is driven into the wilderness and tempted by Satan, calls the first disciples, casts out an unclean spirit, heals many, preaches throughout Galilee and cleanses a leper. In the succeeding verses, Jesus reiterates, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” In Mark, the earliest written gospel, Jesus does not ‘sit in glory.’

I’ve been teaching for a decade at Union Theological Seminary, Philippines, and I’ve been told by some of my students that during the first few sessions of sitting in classes with me, it felt like their asses were on fire and their armpits were sweated profusely. Another student said that before she came, she was told by her superintendent to be wary of the things I was teaching (I was teaching Feminist and Christian theology), and so when she came to sit in class, she would pray that she be “delivered from evil” in the first few sessions. They all became feminists and my friends soon after though. But as much as they wanted to sit in class after the initial tension, our curriculum had a field education program which required them to participate in protest marches and weekend exposures during the semester, and six-week community immersions during the summer. They lived, ate, slept and worked with vulnerable communities like the Lumad, indigenous peoples in the mountains in Mindanao, who were resisting the entry of large-scale mining companies and were experiencing harassment from the military in their schools and communities, on almost a daily basis. Or they would be sent to a migrant worker organization, Migrante, where they would assist the families of migrant workers who are victims of gross maltreatment or have to be brought home in a coffin. The seminary students were instructed not to do mission, not to preach or try to convert those whom they met. They were told listen to their

**Comment [KP1]:** You might also want our integrations with the labor groups and labor unions in factories where our workers continue to be at the receiving end of the worst effects of bureaucrat capitalism

stories, to share in their joys and pains, and to seek to understand their struggles and aspirations as a people. Soon, our students went on to places we have never been and accomplish things we never even imagined.

In the whole of August, the President of our seminary, Rev. Dr. Eleazar Fernandez, authorized the receiving of 65 Lumad, indigenous peoples from another island in the Philippines, in the seminary property who sought sanctuary with us after their alternative schools were closed down by the government and were accused of being breeding grounds for rebels. They are forced to flee several times a year when the threats seem immediate but they always return to their land when they feel it is safer. In the past 16 years, I have witnessed our community give sanctuary to communities who are forced to flee because of state violence. And, then and now, our churches have been called “enemies of the State.” So, a handful of our students committed themselves to ensuring that the Lumad felt at home. We raised funds to feed them for a month which cost about USD 120 per day at two dollars per person. And our students who were also often lacking in food and money themselves, found ways to buy toiletries, food, medicines and other essentials for 65 people for 30 days as the money trickled in. It may not be comparable to the feeding of thousands in the gospels but I think it was some sort of a miracle too that we could respond to the need of the Lumad for 30 days through the help of alumni and friends. And during this time, we were again made aware of the vulnerability of our students and our community.

This semester, they also began to participate regularly in the “bungkalan” at Lupang Ramos or Ramos Land. Bungkalan literally translates to “to till the soil.” The act of tilling the soil in a farmland is nothing spectacular. Except when one is tilling a contested piece of land. Ramos Land is a 372 hectare land which was made public and open since the 1930s, during the Commonwealth Era. Over the years, 300 peasant families have cultivated the land continuously.

**Comment [KP2]:** ... they began to regularly participate in the “bunkalan” of Lupang Ramos. Bungkalan literally translates to “to till the soil.” The act of tilling the soil in a farmland is nothing spectacular. Except when one is tilling a contested piece of land.

In 1965, an Emerito Ramos started to claim the land for himself and the farmer-residents became workers. In 1990, the Ramos family attempted to bulldoze and flatten the agricultural lands so that the 372 hectares could be used for real estate. It was then that women farmers resisted and defended their position and their crops. Today, the Ramos Family have armed guards and continue to pressure farmers to give up their struggle for the land. And last semester, several students from our seminary began to cultivate portions of the land with the farmers during the weekend: buying seeds and seedlings, planting, harvesting, and selling their crops with the proceeds going to the farmer's association in Lupang Ramos. Every day and every hour, farmers and allies stand watch for the armed guards of the Ramoses who continue to harass the peasant communities. Over a month ago, our students were asked by the farmers to pray with them, and in the past few weeks, they have been holding ecumenical worship services where pastors and priests, many of them still students, preach and serve the Eucharist.

Perhaps it is necessary to mention that the students who hold mass/service every Sunday upon the invitation of the peasant farmers in Lupang Ramos are mostly women. The ones who the farmers invite for their association meetings are our women students. When the farmers found themselves with a court case, they went to our women's dormitory—one jeepney load of them—to seek help. When the farmers were beaten by goons it was our women students who got the SMS message first. And they were among the first to respond. It was not by election or appointment that our women students were given leadership roles: it was a decision of the farming community who probably did not think of them as women per se. But as pastors who were genuinely engaged in their struggle for life and land.

I sometimes fear for the safety of the bravest and most committed among our students and have reminded them to always evaluate the risks. Sometimes, I feel they are now so far away from the

**Comment [KP3]:** With the proceeds going to the collective funds of the farmers association in Lupang Ramos.

classrooms where they used to just sit and struggle with theories and concepts. I think they have taken to heart what Jesus asserted in our gospel text, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

I wish I could end here but I can't. I cannot forgive myself if I did not raise the gender issue in this text more pointedly. It scandalizes me that the men in the text can negotiate about authority and power when in other narratives women cannot even imagine speaking to Jesus and sitting beside Jesus: Mary who sat at Jesus feet while ‘listening’ to Jesus. (Luke 10: 39); the bleeding woman who dared to touch the cloak of Jesus because she should not even be in a crowd being ritually unclean (Matthew 9:20–22, Mark 5:25–34, Luke 8:43–48); the woman described as a sinner who bathed Jesus’s feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. What strikes me about these women is that they did not negotiate with Jesus but acted willfully against established socio-political norms to assert their right to life and dignity for themselves and for others.

James and John asked to “sit in glory” with Jesus because they could not yet imagine the Kingdom of God which is an overturning of the order and hierarchies of the Kingdom of Rome, the empire. Today, men still monopolize and maintain hierarchies of power and glory. It took 90 years for Emmanuel College to have its first woman principal. Our seminary, Union, is a century and a decade old and we have not had a woman president. Perhaps, we can learn from our women students’ experiences on what Jesus meant about being first and being great. Being first and being great is not about “sitting in glory,” or having power and privilege. It is about being received, accepted, and invited to sit, stand, and journey with vulnerable communities struggling for life and land, like the farmers of Lupang Ramos and the Lumad of Mindanao. To be their ally, their comrade, their slave and their servant, this is the demand of Jesus, the “Suffering Servant” in Mark, and this is what it means to be great and have glory in the Kingdom of God.

Solidarity and Servanthood  
Lizette Tapia- Raquel

Emmanuel Chapel, October 17, 2018  
Anne Duncan Gray Scholar

