
Return to Love: Diaconal Service as a Missiological Response in the Face of Hatred

Man Hei Yip

Wartburg Theological Seminary

On January 23, 2025, House Resolution 59 was introduced in the United States Congress, denouncing Episcopal Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde for her sermon delivered at the National Prayer Service held at Washington National Cathedral on the day after the January 20 Presidential Inauguration. Her crime was proclaiming a plea to the President to show mercy and compassion to the marginalized and oppressed. The concepts of mercy and compassion have long been viewed as Christian obligations, derived not from human standards but from divine intervention in human history. However, these widely embraced Christian teachings were quickly politicized and perceived as a form of seditious activism. The fate of “mercy” and “compassion” as potentially banned words remains unclear. However, it is evident that society has shifted toward a harsher and more unforgiving attitude toward others. Polarization has even infiltrated Christian perspectives on these important teachings, dividing Christians into two opposing camps. One group urges the separation of politics and preaching, while the other contends that it is necessary to include the political context of the Roman empire from the gospel narrative.

Under such circumstances, how does *diakonia*, the embodied expression of mercy and compassion in the church and the world, face the challenge of surviving and thriving in this form of coloniality? This article first unveils how the coloniality of power currently taking hold in the United States colludes with religion to reconstruct the knowledge system to reinforce the ideology of nationalist imperialism. Second, it explores the concept of *basileia tou theou* (the reign of God) and how love reigns to unsettle the death-dealing powers. The article culminates in a call for ecumenical solidarity as a form of missiological resistance in this critical moment.

Unmasking the coloniality of being

Rooted in Eurocentrism and Western modernity, coloniality is a condition that exerts control over knowledge production and intersubjective relationships domestically, while also extending its influence internationally through the global economy, thereby shaping the global order. As Walter D. Mignolo observed,

The concepts of mercy and compassion have long been viewed as Christian obligations, derived not from human standards but from divine intervention in human history. However, these widely embraced Christian teachings were quickly politicized ... it is evident that society has shifted toward a harsher and more unforgiving attitude toward others.

the world has seen “the era of Westernization of the planet, political and economic unilaterality, and epistemic and aesthetic universality” over the last 500 years.¹ Mignolo goes on to argue that Covid-19, nevertheless, revealed the limitation of Western domination at its deepest level. He explains: “The pandemic only accelerated a process that is irreversible and provided more evidence that the long-lasting consequences of coloniality are no longer hidden under the rhetoric of modernity, development, progress,” etc.²

While the sense of certainty deposited in Western modernity became shaky, concerns over greed and totalizing values that are condoned through unilateral acts have started to draw public attention to perspectives that prioritize the wellbeing of the poor and oppressed. Actions, such as showing mercy and compassion toward historically marginalized communities and educating people to do likewise, provide not only an alternative approach but also a corrective to dehumanizing policies. However, these

1. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (Duke University Press, 2021), x.

2. Mignolo, *Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, x.

life-affirming changes also create unease among those invested in their privileges. The task of de-Westernization that promises to turn the established power structures and relations upside down is thus seen as evil that needs to be eradicated. Mignolo puts it crudely: “de-Westernization and decoloniality provoked the counterreformation, that is, re-Westernization.”³

The policies and actions of the current U.S. administration serve as a prime example. In the first week of President Trump’s second term, a wave of attacks targeted both LGBTQ and immigrant and refugee communities. Plans are underway to eliminate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs, as well as to stop federal funding, and the list goes on. Equally distressing, President Trump called Bishop Budde of the National Cathedral “nasty in tone” after she delivered a sermon pleading him to show mercy and compassion toward the communities he attacked. The response from supporters of the President is also alarming. According to CBS news report:

Republicans in Congress have also reacted angrily to the service, with Rep. Mike Collins of Georgia posting on social media “the person giving this sermon should be added to the deportation list,” although Budde was born in New Jersey. GOP conference chair Lisa McClain said Wednesday that Budde is “extreme in her views, extremely out of line and out of touch, and what she did was uncalled for.”⁴

The crime of Bishop Budde was to deliver a sermon that proclaimed God’s faithfulness toward God’s beloved creation. The message revealed an inconvenient truth that certain groups of people, such as the LGBTQ and immigrant and refugee communities, whose bodies require additional care and protection in failing to meet the ideals of capitalism are deemed unlovable, unworthy, and unproductive. Her message confronts head-on the cruelty of the state and its vices of violence and xenophobia. A message of such subversive nature was considered a great threat to the administration. Blame and harassment against this dissenting voice were in order. Discrimination and marginalization are henceforth legitimized and sanctioned in the name of law and order.

With Vice President J.D. Vance’s later attempt to “re-define” who the neighbor is by rejecting the vulnerable communities as the preferential option of the reign of God, we see how the gospel is being hijacked and distorted by another gospel that heralds the ideology of “American First.” It is evident how religion colludes with the state and is being co-opted on behalf of state power, and is thus weaponized to divide people, demonize the other, and create enemies of the state and the world.

Peter Wehner, a Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy

Actions, such as showing mercy and compassion toward historically marginalized communities and educating people to do likewise, provide not only an alternative approach but also a corrective to dehumanizing policies. However, these life-affirming changes also create unease among those invested in their privileges.

Center, wrote after the 2024 election: “Trump isn’t only winning politically; he is winning *culturally* in shaping America’s manners and mores.”⁵ Mignolo rightly refers to the reality of culturally shaping people’s “manners and mores” as “the coloniality of power.” This form of power does not simply produce knowledge but also affects and even reproduces people’s way of sensing and believing. Mignolo observes that “knowledge (both epistemic and doxastic) controls and manages the subjectivity (aesthesis) of the population affected by it.”⁶

Biased knowledge systems, when taken to the extreme, can both impose certain ways of thinking on people and demand them to think and act uniformly. This includes categorizing others and judging their productivity according to the system’s own standards. Such rigid thinking can easily lead to the demonization of anyone who does not fit into the system’s defined categories, labeling them as unproductive or threatening. The banality of the supporters, whose demand is for erasing the existence of the marginalized and oppressed, solidifies the web of institutional and political forces in justifying the practice of re-Westernization. While the regime proves to be punitive and destructive, re-Westernization hastens the process of it.

Any attempt to unsettle such a knowledge system “needs to be both epistemic and doxastic (which carries the weight of sensing and believing).”⁷ Unmasking the coloniality of power is a necessary step that puts a brake on the homogenizing force that accelerates and perpetuates Western universality. Perhaps, it also reminds us of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said to “drive a spoke into the wheel itself” and not “simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice.” Whether it is putting on a brake or driving a spoke into the wheel, it speaks about the importance of delinking from Western universality. Delinking involves

3. Mignolo, *Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, x.

4. Caroline Linton, “Trump calls National Cathedral bishop ‘nasty in tone’ after her sermon urges him to ‘have mercy,’” CBS news, January 22, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-national-cathedral-bishop-sermon-reaction/>

5. Peter Wehner, “Don’t Give Up on the Truth,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2024/11/america-trump-different-now/680637/>

6. Mignolo, *Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, 5.

7. Mignolo, *Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, 5.

interrogating the authority that deprives others of their humanity. This task of interrogation subsequently opens new avenues for an epistemological turn that invites an honest theological grounding of the episteme as well as re-shaping the sensing and believing that emerges from the epistemic structure.

***Basileia tou theou* (The reign of God): Love reigns in the face of hatred**

The epistemological turn begins with the promise of *basileia tou theou* (the reign of God). In the gospel of Mark, Jesus clearly said that he came to proclaim the good news of God, and 4:14 reads: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.” Then Jesus asked people to repent and believe in the good news. Jesus used parables to illustrate the reign of God. It is even more striking that Jesus embodied the reign of God through performing signs, wonders, and miracles. As the proclaimer of the good news of God’s reign, Jesus himself is now the proclaimed. To unpack this concept, it is worthwhile to reference Luke 4 to see how Jesus challenged existing assumptions of the parameters of God’s reign.

When teaching at the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.
(Luke 4:16-19)

Immediately after his reading, Jesus said in verse 21: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

By self-affirming his identity, Jesus, the speaker, signals that he lived that tradition, was familiar with that tradition, and was himself the one who had been prophesized. Jesus came to not only fulfill that tradition but go beyond that to proclaim God’s salvation for the earth. Those hearing these words would know what Jesus was talking about, because they also were part of that shared tradition. As we continue with the text, Jesus’ proclamation was met with hostility and rejection. Despite the crowd’s anger, Jesus insisted that God’s favor extended to outsiders: a widow in Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian leper. These references underscore God’s preferential option for the least, the marginalized, and the socially excluded.

Let us not forget the broader context in which Jesus taught! According to Luke 3:1-2, it was “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.” To be precise, it was under the imperial rule of the Roman Empire.

Despite the fact that there was little room for prophetic proclamation under the imperial rule, Jesus’ unapologetic reading of the Isaiah text regarding healing the sick, tending the marginalized, and bringing good news to the poor stood in direct opposition to the prevailing imperial order. Jesus was the one who would lead people into the true hope that God would deliver God’s people from the false peace promised by the Empire.

It was at the time when Herod put John the Baptist in prison and executed him. Then Pontius Pilate and the high-priests Annas and Caiaphas played a crucial role in Jesus’ death and crucifixion. Living under the threat of empire, Jesus’ proclamation of *basileia tou theou* (together with his self-affirmation) reveals the constraints, controversy, and contradictions of the intertwined relationships between politics and religion.

In the imperial order in which the Jewish people lived, there was already a savior and lord who had brought “peace and salvation” to the people.⁸ Despite the fact that there was little room for prophetic proclamation under the imperial rule, Jesus’ unapologetic reading of the Isaiah text regarding healing the sick, tending the marginalized, and bringing good news to the poor stood in direct opposition to the prevailing imperial order. Jesus was the one who would lead people into the true hope that God would deliver God’s people from the false peace promised by the Empire.

In his work titled, *Jesus and Empire*, Richard Horsley calls us to pay attention to Jesus’ alternative way to the imperial order.

In these manifestations of God’s action for the people, and in his offering the kingdom of God to the poor, hungry, and despairing people, Jesus instilled hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. The key to the emergence of a movement from Jesus’ mission, however, was his renewal of covenantal community, calling the people to common cooperative action to arrest the disintegration of their communities and to revitalize their cooperation and mutual support.⁹

8. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Fortress Press, 2003), 12.

9. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 126-127.

Jesus offered an alternative approach that empowered dehumanized individuals to reclaim their identity and inherent worth, presenting a direct challenge to the imperial order that benefits only a select few. *Basileia tou theou* openly confronted and exposed the idolatry of state power that colonized people's minds, sensing, and behaviors.

Let us be clear that what makes the reign of God welcoming and inviting is not our own merciful and compassionate acts, but the very *basileia tou theou* that is built by love and not by law and order. *Basileia tou theou* reaches its climax at the cross of Jesus Christ that revolutionized both the epistemic and doxastic. Jesus on the cross reveals that God is able to suffer, which contradicts the notion of an impassible God. Out of God's freedom, God chooses to suffer with Jesus and God's people. God is the compassionate God.

When the coloniality of power spells punishment synonymous with justice, the compassionate God does not understand justice the same way as does capitalistic society. God did not single out a particular community of people and place the blame on them when things went wrong. God does not "deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." Justice is by no means transactional. Justice is achieved and accompanied by God's mercy and compassion. God gave God's only son for the sake of the world. God's justice in the form of radical and uncompromising love means to give life, not to punish or incite further violence against anyone, particularly those on the margins.

Jesus certainly did not submit himself to earthly authorities, but rather to God and to the point of death. The unbroken trust between God and Jesus is noted, but this does not refute the fact that Jesus' death was a result of clashes with the powers and authorities of his time. The cross is violent as an utterly innocent one had to go through the most unjust and undeserved punishment.

The cross of Jesus Christ bore a unique form of suffering through fear and distress, anxiety and isolation before death. In his suffering, Jesus shares our sufferings and desperation. His self-emptying on the cross speaks against self-justifying claims that endorse hateful speech and xenophobic attacks on the weak and powerless. The cross continually challenges systems and institutions that validate selfishness and profit maximization, reward people with power and privilege at the expense of the poor and marginalized, and preserve the privilege of certain people, protecting their vested interests and perpetuating inequity. While exceeding judicial and legal expectations bounded by human constructs, the cross fully, nakedly, and unreservedly reveals God's unconditional love.

By standing together with the least in society, Jesus defied norms that coordinate behaviors to maintain a good social order. Furthermore, Jesus removed the stigma forcefully imposed on the otherized communities, which enabled them to live a life of dignity signifying the possibility of reordering relationships. Jesus also commissioned the church to continue proclaiming

The cross continually challenges systems and institutions that validate selfishness and profit maximization, reward people with power and privilege at the expense of the poor and marginalized, and preserve the privilege of certain people, protecting their vested interests and perpetuating inequity.

God's reign. How can we understand anew Jesus' commissioning when the coloniality of power is taking a new shape to subjugate people, particularly the most vulnerable?

Return to love: Diaconal service as a missional response to resist the powers

As discussed earlier, *basileia tou theou* subverts our knowledge system, including sensing, believing and, eventually, ways of relating to others. Ivone Gebara writes:

We know that all epistemologies lead us to ethical issues. This is so because knowing is itself an act that has consequences, both for the knowing subject and for the community...every act of knowing involves an attitude toward life, both at the moment of knowing and in its relationship with the predictable or unpredictable situations that mark our everyday lives...To know is to take a stand...To know is to take a position in relation to other living beings, other human beings, and oneself.¹⁰

The daily damage done by the presidential administration is alarming and depressing. But it also clearly indicates that the world cannot return to the normal. There is no better time than now for us to stand together in bearing faithful witness to the gospel in this tumultuous and precarious time.

Navigating the complexities of the current regime, we must tread carefully, sharing our message with skill and creativity and without compromising its essence. As words such as "truth" and "facts" are hijacked, and "mercy" and "compassion" are politicized, we may need to reframe the narrative, focusing instead on the unifying power of love. Christian mission is more than coming up with the right strategy to maximize the number of followers. Rather, it summons a faithful response to the calling of Jesus Christ in proclaiming the reign of God with love and through love.

10. Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water* (Fortress Press, 1999), 23-24.

Love is incredibly subversive, especially in times marked by a lack of love and the presence of hate. As the proverb states, “When hate grows loud, love must respond even louder.” There is no better passage than 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 when discussing the nature of love. The background of 1 Corinthians was that of a church deeply divided and lacking love—a resonant issue today. This text shifts our discussion from divine protection over the vulnerable by extending the invitation for Christ followers to love. Paul makes clear that even the most valued gifts—prophecy and knowledge—are meaningless without love. Similarly, we can perform all kinds of diaconal service but without love, they are meaningless.

Diaconal service cannot be reduced to a mere obligation but is a ministry compelled by love. Love is patient, and kind; it does not envy, boast, or dishonor others. Even giving a cup of water and a warm welcome speak volumes to those who are experiencing hardship, rejection, and exclusion. Yet, of course, we can do more! The concept of diaconal service as a missiological practice is not new, and neither is a love-driven and love-informed diakonia. However, Christian mission that prioritizes loving service through diaconal acts not only provides a counternarrative to the world that speaks punishment and profit-maximization but offers a relational ethic that truly honors the dignity of others—just as God loves the unlovable and the excluded.

To be precise, diaconal-missiological practice calls forth Christian unity as a faithful missiological response and resistance to the new Pax Americana. It calls on dictators to put down their weapons that inflict harm and violence on the least in society. It calls on self-seeking, self-promoting leaders to be woke to their privileges and to recognize the vulnerabilities of our shared humanity; thus, to repent and seek the reign of God. Ultimately, it challenges the officially sanctioned religious discourse and the emerging threat of a state-sponsored religion in the form of law and order. No attempt is made to diminish the importance of law and order, but when law and order are implemented without love, they can easily turn into life-denying forces. Above all, Christian mission expressed through diaconal service speaks love, acts love, and cultivates love. This is the embodiment of God’s alternative to mercy, compassion, and justice. This life-affirming and life-giving ministry of prophetic service helps to manifest the *basileia tou theou* among us and in the world.

There is no room for neutrality when mercilessly demonizing people, disposing them, and deporting them have become commonplace. Christ followers are called to practice mercy and compassion. Christ followers are called to care for the sick, the needy, the foreigner, the rejected, the scapegoat, and all those who are crucified daily during these dysfunctional times

Conclusion

Love is not merely a private matter but a powerful form of public resistance against oppressive, life-denying forces, such as arise from authoritarian regimes. God’s mercy and compassion that culminated in the love of the crucified and risen Christ pointedly reveals the inadequacy and cruelty of the colonizing empire and confronts its dehumanizing policies to vilify the marginalized and vulnerable communities. Diakonia-missiological vision is a reconceptualization and recontextualization of this love, as it offers an alternative approach and even a corrective at this time when society shifts toward a harsher, less merciful attitude toward marginalized communities. Such form of missiological practice stands in opposition to those who weaponize knowledge and power over God’s preferential option for the poor and oppressed. There is no room for neutrality when mercilessly demonizing people, disposing them, and deporting them have become commonplace. Christ followers are called to practice mercy and compassion. Christ followers are called to care for the sick, the needy, the foreigner, the rejected, the scapegoat, and all those who are crucified daily during these dysfunctional times.