

Pauli Murray: In & Out of the Pulpit

Comments on the Keynote by Júlio César Adam

Introduction

The Brazilian poet Adélia Prado says that our eyes are our only tiny window to look at and perceive the world in the restricted 24-hour period of each day. This little lens is all that we have to see the world. Therefore, what we fail to see is always far bigger than what we are able to see. Until last year, when I came to Durham to attend the meeting of the council of Societas Homiletica, Paul Murray, this “luminary of the 20th century,” was completely out of my view. By coming here I had the opportunity to get to know her, her story, her struggle, her life ... With its profound sensitivity to life and to a theology born from life itself, Donyelle McCray’s paper offered us a brilliant view of this activist, poet, lawyer, professor, Episcopal priest, and preacher.

I would like to present here a few aspects of my response to this excellent talk. I speak out of my own context, Brazil, a context marked by ethnic-cultural and religious diversity, by social injustice and the vulnerability of an immense part of the population, by prejudice against differences, by violence and daily fear, but at the same time also a context marked by hope, dance and feast, by resistance through art, improvisation and joy, by reflection and articulation of contextual liberation theologies. I consider this the crossroads of so many worlds – Pauli Murray, the view of Donyelle McCray, my little window through which I look at things from Brazil, and all of us here bringing so many perspectives – to be a fertile ground to remember the greatness of Pauli Murray considering our task of preaching in a world full of fear.

First, I would like to make a few comments about the talk in itself. Then I intend to take up a few aspects of Pauli Murray’s preaching and finally to risk establishing a few connections with the topic of our conference, viz. the relationship between fear and preaching.

The talk

McCray’s talk had a profound impact on me because it starts from the concrete, real, conflictive life of a person and of persons, their time, their people. It focuses on Pauli Murray’s life in its full

intensity. This way of doing theology and of doing homiletics is important particularly in the southern hemisphere of the world, where even today voices are often silenced and persons and contexts are rendered invisible to much of the northern hemisphere. In Latin America the seeing-judging-acting method offers—in spite of all limitations involved in it—an enormous contribution that enables us for the first time and in the first place to look at reality, to look at the lives of people, and to understand the meaning of a theology that emerges from life in order to transform its own context.

The approach developed by McCray goes in this direction. I would say that to adopt this path means to reinforce a rhetoric of dissent and protest against the classic means used in academia and in theology. When I was doing my doctorate in Germany, I established a dialog between a Brazilian landless, semi-illiterate, female peasant and Friedrich Schleiermacher on “*darstellendes Handeln*,” which was seen by some people as an attack against theological science. Talking about Grandma Cornelia as a theological and homiletical inspiration for Pauli Murray is something that strongly resonates with the way we try to do practical theology in my context. Besides that, by describing not only the life of Murray but also of those who marked her, McCray retrieved the memory of Murray – of a time, of a people, and of a struggle that is still relevant.

In this way, when we experience a little bit of Pauli Murray’s life and work, other lives are illuminated and brought to our memory. I remembered many people, some I know and others I do not, who marked the lives of persons and social groups for having dared to be who they are. I remembered, for instance, Marielle Franco, a Brazilian woman, black, homosexual, a sociologist, politician, feminist, advocate of human rights, especially of young people, black people, and women. She was a member of the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL, in the Brazilian acronym), had been elected city council member of Rio de Janeiro with the fifth largest number of votes, and constantly denounced abuses of authority by police officers against dwellers of needy communities. On March 14th of this year, Marielle was shot dead in the downtown area of Rio de Janeiro due to her agitating and challenging preaching. The case was shared through the international media, but so far those responsible for her murder have not been identified or punished.

Doing theology out of concrete life, particularly starting from places where life hurts, strengthening a rhetoric of dissent, protest, and retrieval of memory are lessons that we learn from Pauli Murray herself. In other words, McCray’s talk not only offers us a very rich content but is also organized in a way that is very much in tune with Murray herself, which helps not only to broaden our view, but also to experience Pauli Murray “in and out of the pulpit.”

Preaching

Even if we restrict ourselves to Pauli's writings, it becomes evident that her preaching was marked by a broad and critical view of the world, by physical and emotional energy, and by a new aesthetics of authority, without giving up essential foundations of preaching, i.e. the "three-legged-stool" of Scripture, tradition, and reason. McCray helps us to realize that Pauli Murray's preaching, as well as her poetry and multifaceted activity as a professional and as a citizen, comes from various sources of inspiration and empowerment, among which at least three are taken into account: Pauli's grandmother, poetry, and academia.

Her grandmother, Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald, is the affective, maternal voice. At the same time she is a strong, loud, angry, energetic, clear, pragmatic, and fair voice, full of gestures, bodily, paced, guttural, the voice of someone like Daniel in the lions' den (her favorite story), of someone who experiences a spirituality that dives into daily life, impelled by the Spirit and engaged in order to change what is ethically wrong.

Langston Hughes's poetry leads Murray to use poetry as prophecy. Poetry amplifies Cornelia's voice as protest directed to the world. Poetry is the most adequate language for theology because it enables us to give a voice to the unutterable in the midst of a symbolic, metaphorical space, thus expressing that which cannot otherwise be said. In poetry, Murray takes preaching beyond the pulpit, outside the sanctuary, but she also integrates it into her preaching as well as into other literary genres.

James Cone's black theology gives Pauli what she did not find in seminary, viz. the possibility of integrating her voice in the struggle for rights, justice, and freedom within the conception and perception of God in the midst of the cruelty of black people's lived experience. "In Cone, Pauli found a theologian who read the meaning of Christianity through the lens of African American experiences of suffering and survival" (D. McCray). This is preaching that speaks the truth to the people: divine truth that enters life and creates human action for liberation, a liberation that rocks the dance for liberation, a preaching that embodies liberation.

Paul Murray and the theme of the conference: "Fearing God in a Fear-Filled World? Homiletical Explorations"

In her approach, McCray offers us many clues about the relationship between fear and preaching. Last year, the international board of *Societas Homiletica* had a lengthy discussion that guided us toward this theme. We also discussed Pauli Murray. In spite of that, I returned to Brazil with a question that concerns me: How do our sermons deal with fear? The fear of violence, first of all.

When I speak about violence, maybe some of you are not able to imagine the fear that it causes in some parts of my country. Last year 59,103 people were killed in Brazil; on average, one every 9 minutes. The overwhelming majority of these deaths is related to drug trafficking, concentrated in the favelas and peripheries of cities. Most of the victims are either young, black men or women who are attacked by their partners in the domestic realm. How can one talk about fearing God in a world full of fear such as this?

Pauli Murray experienced fear. She was afraid of disrespect, of having her yard invaded by neighbors, which her grandmother considered an aggressive act. She had the fear of not being listened to because she was a woman and black, the fear of concrete aggression by the police in protests in which she participated by occupying seats in buses or places in restaurants that were reserved for whites, and the fear of attacks by white supremacy groups (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan). Murray also faced a more symbolic fear of not being able to bring justice and offer care for the dignity of her African American people. Additionally, there was also a more personal and intimate fear, which can be inferred from the list she gave to her doctor describing her condition during the occasion of one of her hospital admissions: the fear of not being able to be herself, the anguish of understanding herself as black, as woman, as queer.

How does Murray deal with fear? Not just by preaching! This may be something of fundamental importance for reflection in our homiletics. Fear is not a problem solved only with and in preaching. Murray faced fear by resorting to all means available to her in life. Perhaps for this reason she was so many Paulis in one and the same person. Like her grandma, Cornelia, she faced fear by speaking, gesturing, using her body, writing, making poetry, and teaching. She faced fear by acting concretely and symbolically. As far as preaching is concerned, the preacher Pauli used poetry and all other possible genres in order to speak. Preaching in a world full of fear means preaching politically, taking sides, denouncing profound injustices. Poetic prophecy permeates her preaching as a veritable embodiment of peace, revolt, and the cry for rights and justice. Preaching means to keep alive the memory of those who are present and absent. Preaching memory is held together with the liturgy and in the eucharist where the dangerous memory of Christ is celebrated (Johannes Baptist Metz). Murray's preaching faced fear not only through her use of reason, but also through the use of emotion, indignation, and anger, of tears and frustration at what we cannot change and where we can only trust. In this way she inspires us not only to preach but also to live and struggle.

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