

# Crossing Social Margins and Encountering God

STORY BY SARAH KYE PRICE  
PHOTOS BY PATIENCE SALGADO



LAST JANUARY, I had a moment I can only describe as an encounter with God. I had spent the previous day, the Feast of the Epiphany, working at the food pantry at St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco. I could see God's presence reflected in the faces of all who came into the parish, circling around the center altar table where they received food, love and hospitality lavishly bestowed on a wet, chilly day.

That day after the Epiphany, I learned of a grant opportunity available to seminarians for innovative evangelism projects. As I gathered with my seminary classmates to learn more, I experienced my own epiphany: What if the people I work with who have so much to offer me about God's presence in their lives had a stronger voice? What if the rest of the Church...and the world...could see how God is experienced so beautifully and poignantly across the social margins of our human lives?

I outlined a proposal to bring together unlikely pairings of people into shared Bible study: people experiencing homelessness, students, parishioners, rich and poor, young and old. The society in which we live tends to separate

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and divide people, whether by our political affiliations, social class, or the labels used to define our contribution to society. But I knew first-hand that we all had something to learn from and something to teach each other, if we could just cross those socially constructed margins.

As a social worker, I also realized that these differences in social power might keep us divided, if we allow that to happen. So, as the Church, it becomes imperative for us to engage intentionally with each other in ways that remove barriers to full participation in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.

I imagined a setting where I could pair people together across social margins and introduce them to common ground through the Holy Scriptures.

After all, that is the Good News of the Gospel: we all share equally in the transformative love and presence of Jesus Christ, no exceptions.

With the inspiration of people across social margins who share my journey, and good advice of my mentors, I applied for and received funding from the Episcopal Evangelism Society to make Faith from the Margins to the Web a reality.

Every week of the liturgical year, this project brings two people together across very different social margins: poverty, race, age, ethnicity, social class and all that tends to divide us in the world in which we live. Participants come from local parishes in downtown Richmond that offer feeding programs (both those who serve and those who eat meals at these locations), from Virginia Commonwealth University, and from the surrounding community as word spreads about this opportunity.

I meet with potential participants to explain the project and offer suggestions to create an equal, shared conversation. Those who wish to participate agree to share in conversation around the weekly Gospel lesson from the Revised Common Lectionary, responding to three questions (see page 21) and one story-sharing prompt I've written specifically for each lesson to help spark conversation about how the Gospel is relevant in their lives.

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An important part of this project for me was to honor the authorship contribution of each person in a fair and equal way. Thanks to support from EES, each participant receives \$25 as payment for authorship of the weekly lesson, which helps offset the time and honor the wisdom shared each week. The completed interview comes to me where I have the honor of listening, transcribing and curating their shared conversation onto our blog, Faith from the Margins to the Web ([www.faithfromthemarginstotheweb.com](http://www.faithfromthemarginstotheweb.com)), accompanied by beautiful photography by my colleague Patience Salgado.

This innovative evangelism project began in Advent, with a new Bible study interview posted on the blog each week in preparation for the upcoming Sunday's Gospel. The hope is that the liberating presence of Jesus Christ is revealed through these conversations, and that it moves beyond each pair of people into wider circulation through social media. I like to think of it as the digital footprint of the Holy Spirit.

My own faith already has been renewed and enlivened through this project. I extend invitations to equal numbers of interested people from campus, community and parish on the days we hold the Bible studies, and then see how the mix of people end up coming together. I continue to be amazed that every interview has a point when it is clear that those two people have been brought together with purpose around that Gospel lesson and have been blessed by some commonality in their stories and experiences that they (or I) never would have known.

### The three questions for discussing the weekly Gospel reading:

- 1) What is something that stands out for you in this Gospel, in your own words?
- 2) Where do you see God right now, in this Gospel or in your own life?
- 3) What does this Gospel tell you that you think other people need to hear?

There was the time that Tom, a person experiencing homelessness whom I knew well, ended up paired with a college student I'd met only briefly. They learned that each of their lives of faith had been dramatically changed by the death of close friends from opioid addiction.

Another week, Elaine and Dem discovered that they had both studied the same subjects in college and lived in some of the same places throughout Virginia over the years, even though their paths through life on the surface appeared so different.

Alisha and "Grandma Sheryl" learned that they probably see each other on campus at Virginia Commonwealth University all the time, but had never met. They learned that, in spite of the generations

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and life experiences separating them, they had similar expressions of faith that gave meaning and purpose to their lives. The love of God and the connections that unite us as one, human family become palpable and poignant week after week.

I am brought to tears listening to participants sharing so openly with each other, hearing their voices praying and reading Scripture together, seeing them spontaneously hug each other and keep talking long after the digital recorder is turned off and the interview has officially ended.

When we provide hospitality to people experiencing poverty, homelessness and food insecurity, God's presence is palpable and real in ways that surprise and delight.

It isn't because "we" (the people who have what we need) are providing something to "them" (the people who are in need of food, clothing and shelter). It is because God is so deeply present with us when we realize God as the ultimate source of abundance for us

all. From parish to parish, from coast to coast: God is revealed in every person that we meet.

Visit Faith from the Margins to the Web and see what speaks to you. The content is suited to individual devotions, group Bible study, sermon preparation or for sharing with others. A new Bible study is posted each week, generally on Tuesdays, and you can follow the weekly updates by email, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. If you or your parish is interested in becoming a part of the project, let me know. I hope this is a project that will continue to evangelize all of us, as God is revealed from the margins to the web.



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### SARAH KYE PRICE

Sarah Kye Price is a postulant for the priesthood in the Diocese of Virginia, a seminarian at Church Divinity School of the Pacific, and professor of social work at Virginia Commonwealth University.



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