

THE New Wine PRESS

Volume 30 No. 6 • February 2022





Raechel Kiesel (in mask) with members of the PBMR community

Receiving Welcome

by Raechel Kiesel, Precious Blood Volunteer at PBMR

One sunny Sunday in December, I found myself in the PBMR hallway watching my friend Essie teach the niece of one of the moms in our Families Forward program how to play a clapping game. It was similar to many of the patty-cake-like games I played as a little kid, but it wasn't one I had seen before, so I soon turned to Sr. Carolyn, and we tried to clap along with Essie and our new friend. After many rounds of trying and failing, I ended up playing with the young girl. We had both improved just a little, so soon enough we were shouting together, "Right! Left! 1 Right! Left! 1 2 Right! Left! 1 2 3!" and clapping faster and faster, and when we finally made it to 5—which was a major feat, let me tell you—we jumped up and down and cheered. It was then that I remember watching out of the side of my eye as Fr. Kelly walked past us, narrowly avoiding contact with our flailing, clapping limbs, and I realized just how ridiculous I looked at that moment. Not only did I have reindeer antlers on my head, but I had been bent over playing patty cake with a little girl, laughing, shouting, raucous, and happy, in the middle of the hallway on a Sunday. It took me

a while after that to realize that, actually, it wasn't ridiculous at all—not for PBMR. Because that's what we do here.

Only a month before that, I had been asking Sr. Donna if I could come to the first in-person mothers circle since COVID had rendered them virtual. And when I found out that my parents would be visiting that weekend, I asked if my own mom could come too. Of course, she said, "Oh yeah, that would be great!" So that Sunday morning, I sent my dad with my brother to explore the city, and my mom and I went to PBMR. We were one of the first ones there, and still we looked at Sr. Donna and said, "Are you sure that it's okay if we're here?" We were feeling the discomfort. As two white women, strangers to gun violence and the grief of having lost a child, we were hyper aware of entering a space that did not belong to us—and yet we were invited in. So we made our name tags, pretended like we were comfortable, and we sat next to each other as the rest of the circle filled with beautiful women from around the neighborhood.

I didn't expect to have much to share. Here at PBMR, we sit in circle for staff meetings each week, and by that point I had a pattern. Even coming here, I knew that as a white woman, I had so much I needed to learn. So I had decided early on that my primary role was to listen. Which isn't something I've often told myself—to be humbled and value others' voices over my own.

But in the mothers' circle that day, when the talking piece got to me, I told a story about losing my grandmother, and the beauty that I got to witness in her final days among my family, how important that was to me. Looking around the circle as I was speaking and teary-eyed, and then as my mom spoke after me, the other women were nodding. They looked at us with faces that knew loss deeply, even the loss that we had felt, losing my grandma, my mom losing her mom. That stood out to me. They didn't have to let some white girl walk into their circle and try to say something about grief, but they did. Not only that, they listened and encouraged me, and I felt so welcome and loved in a space I didn't know could be my own.

Jacquelyn Grant, a womanist theologian, makes the case that God is a Black woman and, in fact, manifested “in the community of Black women” (Grant, Jacquelyn. “The Challenge of the Darker Sister.” *White Women's Christ & Black Women's Jesus*, Scholars Press, 1989). In the experience of ancestral Black women, she writes, “They identified with Jesus because they believed that Jesus identified with them. As Jesus was persecuted and made to suffer undeservedly, so were they.” I read these passages years ago, but only now, witnessing the power of the community of Black women who gather at PBMR, do I understand them more clearly. These women incarnate God's love, strength, and pain in our community, as they've done for me.

So our women—our community—are the ones who really decide that hospitality is what we do at PBMR. I know it might have been the founders thinking it over in the beginning, but the mothers sitting in circle that day were the ones to tell me, no, you're welcome here. Come into this circle, sit with us, be with us. We know your pain, and we can

share ours, and the burden can be a bit lighter. We can share healing, too, and laughter, and breakfast, and we can play patty cake and laugh raucously in the middle of the hallway together. ✦

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what we have to offer. As we seek to be means of God's peace, we must be where we are needed and move with our brothers and sisters rather than build in a place they may not come.

The author goes on to talk about three things that have frustrated racial reconciliation: bad theology, bad history, and the extent we white people underestimate our privilege. She makes a disturbing point about the failure of the word reconciliation in this context:

“When have white people ever been in just relationship with Black people? During slavery? During Jim Crow? During the War on Drugs? What are we RE-conciling? It pretends that there was a time when everything was fine, we just need to get back there. However, that idyllic time has never existed.”

This statement is something we should bear in mind as ministers of reconciliation. The only ideal places in the Bible are at the beginning and the end; Eden is not a place we can rebuild via our own efforts. It's important in any case the reconciliation we are trying to build is really a new relationship liberated from a toxic past. Many times what we're trying to call into being is a new creation

If we are to be wounded healers, we need to let go of the need to be the hero of our own stories.

We also need to let go of the need to be experts. We need to let go of the need to be an authority. We need to be able to recognize when our hands are empty, and be honest when they are. We need to be able to recognize that the stories we tell may be irrelevant to those on the margins. We need to recognize Jesus is the only hero we really need.

Princess theology is difficult to escape. We can still dream of a perfect world however, what is the world we want to see: our ideal, or the Kingdom of God? ✦