

## A RESPONSE TO KATHY MOWRY'S "ONLY ONE FOOT IN EXILE"

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The metaphor of Exile is tricky. Along with Exodus and Easter, Exile is one of the fundamental events that orient the biblical story. So, on the one hand, the People of God should resonate with the idea and use it as a lens through which to interpret their continuing story. However, the metaphor can be a deceptive one, especially if it is invoked too early or too strongly in a community of faith's experience of dislocation or transition. Dr. Mowry's recognize this, and her paper gives us some very helpful perspective on how we might employ the idea of Exile without fooling ourselves with it. By bifurcating the idea of exile into marginalization and dispossession and then asserting that we are beginning to experience the first reality but are rather far still from the second, Dr. Mowry shows us how we can use the metaphor of Exile to our advantage and also be leery of its traps. She invites us into thinking through this process with a few observations of her own, and she points our thinking down some fruitful paths. In responding to her paper, I want to venture just a bit down two of those paths.

First, looking through the lens that Dr. Mowry gives us, we see Exile as God's treatment of the cancer of our idolatry. The first phase of Exile, labeled "marginalization" in the paper, is much like radiation treatment, trying to shrink a tumor in the hopes of getting it to disappear completely. In one way, our nascent marginalization may reflect God's gentleness with us. As we read the Old Testament, however, we know that Israel did not respond effectively to this level of treatment, and they fought their political dislocation by playing the political games of their day. Ignoring the warnings of the prophets, they persisted in their various idolatries and so prompted a more drastic treatment by God: a kind of invasive surgery that dispossessed Israel of all that it had—a radical idol-ectomy, as it were.

If Dr. Mowry is correct in that we are experience the *grace* of marginalization—and I use that word deliberately—as we are being moved out of our previously-held positions of cultural power and influence, then we would do well to learn from Israel's history and act now before we become forcefully dispossessed. If we can dispossess ourselves now for the sake of the "other," while it is still a voluntary or freely chosen act, then our dispossession can be an act of love. If, however, we wait until God forcefully dispossesses us, then we lose that opportunity. Like Israel, our losses will become the consequences of our sinful idolatry and not testimonies to the Reign of God at work in the world. What would happen, I wonder, if we saw our dislocation as an opportunity to be seized rather than a threat to be fought?

Second, I'm intrigued by the tension between stewardship and the idea of dispossession as a part of Exile. We use the idea of stewardship a lot in the church, but I wonder how often it is pious language that masks a form of idolatry. It seems to me that we too easily confuse the caretaking of *stewardship*, in which the one in control and the primary beneficiary of our activity is someone else, with the caretaking of *ownership*, in which our activity is primary driven by

selfishness and oriented on our own benefit. We say that we are trying to be good stewards of our building, our time, our resources—whatever. But what we too often mean is that we want things done our way and that we want to set the agenda for how our “stuff” is used and cared for.

I’m excited about the idea that our partial exile might give us a change to reinvigorate the meaning of our stewardship by inviting us to forsake our pretensions to ownership. If everything belongs to God, then we do not—cannot—dispossess ourselves of anything. Dispossession requires ownership, and we own nothing. Instead, our marginalization is our opportunity to surrender the *illusion* of our ownership and start again acting as if all the “stuff”—and the agenda that promotes is best and most loving use—belongs to God. We have nothing to protect, no “thing” we are responsible *for*—only a God and that God’s Reign that we are all responsible *to*. I’m excited about what that realization could mean for our church and a new rediscovery of its sense of mission in the United States and beyond

So, thank you to Dr. Mowry for her thought-full and thought-provoking paper. She has given us an excellent place to start, so let the deeper conversation begin.