

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
whose mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness;
grande es tu fidelidad.

Lamentations 3:22-23
Lamentaciones 3:23b

Milagros

This last Saturday was a high point in the life of San Gabriel Presbytery. I may be bold in saying that, but the sentiment was shared by the many Presbyterians, local and national, who attended the celebration of the return of Sibana'gna to the Gabrieleno-Tongva people. It was an emotional time as we honored the long history of love and shared history we have experienced on this site, including the almost 80 years of service of La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center, started by the Lizárraga family, long nurtured by members of the Tongva tribe and San Gabriel Presbytery, and now the transition to a new kind of community center, where all of us will learn more about the Gabrieleno-Tongva people, their history and culture, and their vision and wisdom for the care of Creation and the larger community. It was a joyous time, and an opportunity to demonstrate to the whole Presbyterian Church and the world that it is possible to take bold steps towards God's justice and peace.

One of our pastors said that the moment that touched her the most was after the exchange of gifts and prayer of the transfer, and one of the leaders of the tribe said "I have to say, this is a miracle." He then led the tribe and all participants in the burning of sage, and that's when I teared up, knowing that now, the tribe can meet and continue their traditions without having to ask someone else's permission, because they now have a place of their own.

Throughout the morning, I thought of the many seeds that have been planted in years and generations past, in situations that only God could have fashioned into the path that led to Saturday's celebration. I thought a lot about César and Angelita Lizárraga and Tony Rodriguez, Presbyterian pastors who served the Latino community in the San Gabriel area, with worship and tangible assistance over half a century ago. I smiled at the ways Tongva members found welcome and safe community in the Presbyterian Church, at La Casa and at La Verne Heights Presbyterian Church. La Verne Heights has not been a church that seeks to make big declarations or brag about their progressivism—I'd guess that many of them would not appreciate being called "progressive"—but their quiet welcome and respect for the Morales families allowed them to maintain their Christian faith while they grew as strong and amazing advocates for Indigenous people. This is a rare thing, as many Native Americans have not been able to reconcile the Christian faith with the atrocities done against them, supposedly in the name of Jesus Christ. When I saw Deborah Owens, I told the national staff people how Deborah's leadership as Presbytery Moderator in 2021, and the impact of COVID and the murder of George Floyd, led our presbytery to start a few small groups, including the study of reparations, led by N'Yisrela Watts-Afryie, and though the original intent was to look at reconciliation with the Black community (a lens through which we seek to strive for affordable housing), the study helped us understand better the idea of the repair of historical harms done against Native Americans as well. And I thought how this came about as a response to La Casa Community Center closing—but rather than see closure as a failure or ending of their legacy, the Lizárraga family came with great passion to bless and thank God for this next chapter of life and service with the return to the tribe. On a personal note, I think of the "-isms" that pushed me to start my ministry in Hawai'i, where my leadership potential was recognized, and where I learned so much about the work towards justice for Native peoples. I can see direct lines through all these events and many more that God put in place to lead us to this historic event. Great is the faithfulness of God.

Of course, not everything is happy and easy, even in our Presbytery, even this weekend. On Sunday morning I went to worship with Iglesia de la Comunidad. Last week was Roberto Ramírez' last Sunday as their pastor, and last month the Session was notified that Avance Charter School, which has been using a significant part of the church's campus and contributed heavily to the maintenance of this very large and aging facility, was closing down on almost no notice, a victim of financial issues among former leaders and the federal government's drastic cuts in education funding. So the congregation now faces an immediate future with no pastor and a severe shortfall in the ability to pay a new pastor.

I went into the large sanctuary and joined the small group who came to worship. (On a side note, I had one of those lovely LA moments—as I walked up the aisle, an older Latina lady started speaking to me in Spanish, gesturing towards my jacket. I nodded and smiled, not knowing what she was saying, but it became clear she was asking a specific question about my jacket. I mumbled a couple of words in English and she stopped and said “You speak English?” When I nodded, she then repeated her question and carried on the conversation in perfect English! Glad I fit in so well!)

For this Sunday, I was prepared to grieve with the congregation, and to take the blows that Presbytery folk often get from frustrated congregations who don't know who else to blame for their troubles. Instead, I was warmly greeted by the members I know there, and one of the elders, who is the worship leader, started singing. One lovely new song was “Tu Fidelidad” by Marcos Witt. A line from the song that was repeated throughout the service was “grande es tu fidelidad,” which in English we all know as “great is your faithfulness.”

At times, the elder would not sing in order to hear this small congregation, who sang with full, confident voices, “grande es tu fidelidad.” That's when my own despair over the struggles ahead for this congregation turned into the wild thought, could this be the next place God blesses San Gabriel Presbytery with another miracle? I wondered if, perhaps years from now, the people of Iglesia de la Comunidad could say what the Tongva leader said on Saturday—that they have seen a milagro (miracle)?

Even before Saturday, I have witnessed more miracles in the life of San Gabriel Presbytery than I've ever seen in my life. While we cannot take God's miracles for granted, and certainly we cannot order up a miracle with the ease with which we order food for delivery, God may continue to do amazing, improbable things in this presbytery in the future. May we be open to the possibility, and keen to see God's miraculous work in our midst.

Thanks be to God!

Wendy