

## MINISTERING

Kristine Haglund

My assigned topic is “Ministering with the Power and Authority of God.” It’s a daunting topic, and one that requires a preliminary confession: when I hear the word “minister,” my most immediate and strongest association is with the Monty Python sketch about the Ministry of Silly Walks, so it has been good for me to research this topic and find some other associations to go with the word. We’ll get to etymology in a minute, but first a story from the scriptures—or, uh, from the *New Yorker*.

In the April 30, 2018 issue of the *New Yorker*, Elif Batuman wrote about the “Rent-a-Family” industry in Japan.<sup>1</sup> She began with the story of Kazushige Nishida, a middle class, sixty-something-year-old salesman, recently widowed, and somewhat estranged from his only child. He contacted a company called Family Romance, which Batuman describes as “one of a number of agencies in Japan that rent out replacement relatives. He placed an order for a wife and daughter to join him for dinner. He described his real wife and daughter, hoping that the replacement wife might be “a little plump” as his wife had been. He paid 40,000 yen (about \$370) and waited for them to come.

When they arrived, the replacement wife spent some time asking him about how he would like her and the replacement daughter to act. He described some of his late wife’s mannerisms, and the way his daughter sometimes poked him playfully in the ribs. The two actresses did their best to incorporate these into their evening together.

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1. Elif Batuman, “Japan’s Rent-a-Family Industry,” *New Yorker*, Apr. 30, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/30/japans-rent-a-family-industry>.

Kazu paid for them to come again, several times, and he found himself feeling lighter, and sharing his feelings with the two women who were role-playing a family with him. Something like friendship began to grow—he explained how he and his daughter had argued before she left home, and the rental daughter offered him advice about how he might reach out to her. He called his real daughter, as the rental daughter had suggested, and tried hard to understand her point of view. One day, he came home and saw fresh flowers on the family altar. His daughter had returned to pay tribute to her departed mother and make a tentative peace offering to her father.

“I’ve been telling her to come home,” he told the reporter, “I’m hoping to see her again soon.”

This story seems terribly sad, but also revelatory and hopeful to me. Perhaps the most important revelation the story makes is that our deepest needs are not very complicated—the love we need most is manifest not in poetry, but in simple, prosaic, kindly deeds. When I was younger, I can remember passionately denouncing visiting teaching because friendship by assignment seemed so forced and artificial. I thought it might sometimes *lead to* authentic affection for someone, but I didn’t think that stilted, awkward gestures of charity could themselves represent authentic Christian love. I think I wanted to feel the way the protagonist feels in “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief”—I wanted it to be dramatic; I didn’t think love counted unless I was ready to give my life for someone. As I’ve gotten older, and become (a little) less prone to passionate denunciations, I’ve realized that a lot of the time, it is just dinner and another human voice we need. Or, as a friend of mine who lives alone once put it—“sometimes you just need there to be someone who knows you went to Target today.” Sometimes these small things yield miraculous ones, as in this story where the rental daughter helped Mr. Nishida understand his daughter’s perspective enough to reach out to her. And sometimes small gestures are freighted with enormous meaning, like the flowers the daughter leaves in memory of her mother.

But sometimes not. Sometimes it's just dinner. And the miracle is that dinner turns out to be enough.

There's one paragraph I want to specially draw attention to: "The wife asked Nishida for details about how she and the daughter should act. Nishida demonstrated the characteristic toss of the head with which his late wife had rearranged her hair, and his daughter's playful way of poking him in the ribs. Soon the rental wife called him Kazu, just as his real wife had, and tossed her head to shake back her hair. The rental daughter playfully poked him in the ribs."

In this story, it's very clear who is in charge—although Mr. Nishida is having service provided to him, he gets to direct the scene. The two women rely on him to tell them what to do until they have established enough of a relationship to accurately anticipate some of what he needs.

I want to tell you about a time that a visiting teacher served me powerfully by letting me set the terms of the relationship. As background, maybe it helps to know that I was always a very, very Mormon girl. My dad was a bishop for most of my growing up years, and I always expected to be a bishop's wife (or, let's be honest, maybe actually a bishop). I was a third pew from the front on the right kind of Mormon. But when I moved to this ward, I had recently divorced. In my old ward, my ex-husband had obtained custody of everyone's good opinion. The way that our schedules worked out, he had the kids and took them to church on Sunday mornings, and I skulked around going to different wards, sliding into the very last pew during the opening song and scurrying out before the last line of the closing song so no one would talk to me. I felt fragile and terrified of everyone's judgment, and unsure of how I belonged in the Church anymore.

I was assigned a visiting teacher who, from the outside, seemed pretty formidable. She had been in this ward and stake forever, and had raised what was surely a perfect family here—there was no question that she belonged thoroughly. She was very nice to me, called dutifully to try to set up appointments, even emailed (not her favorite form of

communication) when my phone call-avoiding skills proved daunting. I did not let her come visit me even one time. I'm sure she was puzzled and probably a little hurt—I was at church most weeks, mostly smiling, not apparently incapable of speech—but I was as inhospitable as a porcupine curled up into a spiky little ball. Treats started to appear at my door. Not on a schedule, and way more than once a month . . . beautiful cookies, birthday cupcakes, baskets of the most exquisite raspberries, freshly picked apples, pot roasts . . .

And that was all. She kept bringing gifts, and I kept not letting her in. Eventually, I found a toehold in the ward and uncurled my porcupine self a bit, but by then I was assigned a different visiting teacher and it was easier for me to let someone in. I'm not sure that I ever could tell the bringer of treats how desperately I had needed them. I didn't really understand myself how much her faithfulness, and especially, her *deference* to my odd, shy wishes had meant. I am probably on the list of her least satisfying visiting teaching relationships ever.

And that's a little bit the point. It can be easy, I think, to serve based on our own intuitions of the right way to do things, or our sense of what someone *really* needs. And we might even be right—it's entirely possible that things would have gone better for me if I had gotten over myself and received my visiting teacher's wisdom along with her cookies. But being right is one of the things we have to give up if we want to lose ourselves, as Jesus taught, and find God's image in ourselves and our neighbors. When we undertake to minister to someone, we are asking them to be a rental Jesus for us—we are entreating them to let us serve them, in our bumbling ways, as we would serve the Lord if we were here. It's a pretty big ask. And if the people we are trying to serve are playing God for us, it makes sense to let them direct the scene!

This brings me, in a roundabout way, to a serious point about the Ministry of Silly Walks. That sketch works by subverting our ideas about power. A government ministry ought to be a place where people dress and speak in certain ways, act in the kind of formal way we associate

with power. And in the Ministry of Silly Walks, the people are dressed the way we expect, and they use the bureaucratic language we expect, but they act completely ridiculous, in ways that we associate with people we would never see as powerful or important.

In a way, this undoing of the hierarchy gets us closer to the origin of the word “minister”: it’s actually an old Latinate and French word that comes from the same root as “minus.” The earliest use of “minister” as a verb meant “to serve at table”—ministers were just waiters. So maybe part of what the change from “home and visiting *teaching*” to “ministering” can do is to remind us that in the kingdom of God, the hierarchies by which we organize ourselves on earth will be upended.

If we want to know what the kingdom of God feels like—not just to imagine it, but to experience it now, in our bodies, we have to make ourselves vulnerable, share in the vulnerability of those we are called to love. Maybe this is easier for some of us than others—it’s pretty easy for me to see that most of the things I’m good at and feel comfortable doing are not much good to anyone else. It’s really rare for someone to need, for instance, a brief lecture on the Orientalist imagery in Heinrich von Kleist’s short stories. But even if you *are* good at lots of useful things, it’s in the nature of caring for other people that we often end up doing things that fall outside our comfort zones, and doing them for people who aren’t at their best, either. A lot of times, when we really need someone’s help and have been brave enough to admit it, part of what we think of as “ourselves” isn’t working—maybe it’s our body that temporarily isn’t doing the jobs we expect it to because of illness or injury, maybe it’s our mind and heart because we are struggling through depression or other mental illness, maybe it’s our pride that is damaged by not having enough money to live with the dignity we’re used to. There are all kinds of ways that we can be “not ourselves” when we are in need of help, *and* when we are called on to meet someone else’s need. When it really works, maybe ministering *should* be uncomfortable, because we become unsure of who we

are, who's up and who's down, who is helping whom. God suddenly peers out at us from the eyes of our inconvenient, needy, and infinitely beloved neighbor.

One of my very favorite stories from Church history gets at this confusion of hierarchy and identity:

Joseph Millett was one of the ordinary heroes of the restoration of the Church. He served multiple missions which included miraculous prophecies (about whales!) and their fulfillment, he organized the Lowell, Massachusetts branch, and was called by Brigham Young to settle the Dixie Mission and the even less hospitable Spring Valley, Nevada. And yet it was not only in these acts of heroic devotion that he came to know God. An entry from his journal, at a time of great hardship and loss in his own family, suggests the quiet, dutiful ways in which we come to understand who we are and what God is like:

One of my children came in, said that Brother Newton Hall's folks were out of bread. Had none that day. I put . . . our flour in sack to send up to Brother Hall's. Just then Brother Hall came in. Says I, "Brother Hall, how are you out for flour." "Brother Millett, we have none." "Well, Brother Hall, there is some in that sack. I have divided and was going to send it to you." . . . Brother Hall began to cry. Said he had tried others. Could not get any. Went to the cedars and prayed to the Lord and the Lord told him to go to Joseph Millett. "Well, Brother Hall, you needn't bring this back if the Lord sent you for it. You don't owe me for it." . . . You can't know how good it made me feel to know that the Lord knew that there was such a person as Joseph Millett.<sup>2</sup>

I believe with my whole heart that it is in the moments when we see our sisters and brothers standing before us saying, "Our Heavenly Parents sent me to you. They are counting on you," that we begin to know how the kingdom of God works. It is in our sisters' and brothers' eyes that we can begin to see our selves—and theirs—as God does, and

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2. Diary of Joseph Millett, holograph, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. Quoted by Boyd K. Packer, "A Tribute to the Rank and File of the Church," Apr. 1980, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1980/04/a-tribute-to-the-rank-and-file-of-the-church?lang=eng>.

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know ourselves to be beloved. As we let go of our own feeble power and goodness, give up on doing things “right,” and really listen to each other as we try to love better, it will be in the mouths of our brothers and sisters that we will hear—and feel—God’s words: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”