

**“We Are All Related”**  
Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage  
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Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

When I went out to Pine Ridge Oglala Lakota Reservation in South Dakota the first time in 2011, I didn't actually want to go. I was recovering from an illness and thought that I probably wouldn't be very useful. More importantly, though, I just didn't want to have to face the poverty that I knew I would see there. You see, Pine Ridge is the second poorest region in the Western hemisphere. According to statistics provided to us by the organization we work with, the per capita income is approximately \$8,700. The median household income is \$26,721 for American Indians living on Pine Ridge Reservation. The United States average is \$53,482. Their unemployment rate is close to 89%. The health statistics are even bleaker. One in four children born on Pine Ridge are diagnosed with either Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Tuberculosis is 800% higher than America as a whole. Infant mortality is 300% higher and teen suicide is 150% higher. Approximately 85% of Lakota families are affected by alcoholism and about 50% of adults over the age of 40 have diabetes. Almost 58% of grandparents of Lakota families are raising their grandchildren because the parents aren't available or healthy enough to do so themselves. (<https://www.re-member.org/pine-ridge-reservation.aspx>)

The reason things are so bad on the Rez is because of the way the Lakota were treated by the settlers and the United States. The Lakota were a part of a larger nation, made up also of the Dakota and Nakota. You might know them as the Sioux. This word is a mutation of a term used by a nearby Native American population who were their enemies. As settlers moved across the country, they ran into that group and asked who they would find on the other side. They said, “the Sioux,” which means snake in their language. So the settlers used that name for them.

Their name for themselves is Oceti Sakowin Oyate, which roughly means People of the Seven Circle Fires. These people fought back strenuously against U.S. encroachment, defeating the U.S. army at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. As a result, the U.S. massacred many of their women, children and elderly. Fearing this kind of brutal retaliation, the Oceti Sakowin Oyate surrendered and were then forced into prisoner of war camps, otherwise known as the reservations. Their way of life was destroyed by the United States army, who intentionally slaughtered thousands of buffalo to cut off the supply from the Native nations. Their spiritual practices and culture were made illegal, and they weren't allowed to leave these reservations for many years. Moreover, the U.S. took many of the children away to boarder schools where they tried to force them to adopt white culture, customs, and religion. The people running the boarding schools physically and sexually abused many of these children and then returned them home, battered and ashamed of their people and their culture. Only in the late 1970s were the Lakota allowed to start speaking their language and practice their spirituality again.

So in addition to the anti-Native American racism they experienced, the Oglala Lakota also experienced this complete destruction of their culture, traditions, and family. This is the main reason that the poverty rate, and mental and physical health problems are so severe on this reservation.

I heard all of this from my pastor when she was talking about our church mission trip and it just seemed like a terrible place to visit. I was afraid of the discomfort I would feel when faced with these people and their experiences, and afraid of the guilt I would surely feel. Fortunately for me, my daughter, Katie, was much wiser and braver than I. She was almost 12 at the time and insisted on going with our church on this trip. I didn't want her to go alone, knowing what she would see, and so I went with her.

That first trip changed my life and my ministry in many ways. For one thing, I found that hearing the stories of the Lakota, seeing their situations, and learning more of their history did cause me to feel sad, but this turned out to be a sadness I could bear and hold. Interestingly, it did not cause me to feel guilty. It caused me to feel responsible—meaning that I found that there were positive ways I could act to change their situation, and that I was morally obligated to do so. So going on this trip galvanized me and changed my understanding of how I could be an ally not just to the Oglala Lakota, but to all of those in need. Most importantly, what I learned was that I hadn't really understood the point of missions at all.

Mission work isn't about helping. It's about service, and it's about the reason that we serve. Rachel Naomi Remen offers a wonderful insight about this difference that I would like to quote in full:

Serving is different from helping. Helping is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals. When you help you use your own strength to help those of lesser strength. If I'm attentive to what's going on inside of me when I'm helping, I find that I'm always helping someone who's not as strong as I am, who is needier than I am. People feel this inequality. When we help we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity and wholeness. When I help I am very aware of my own strength.

But we don't serve with our strength, we serve with ourselves. We draw from all of our experiences. Our limitations serve, our wounds serve, even our darkness can serve. The wholeness in us serves the wholeness in others and the wholeness in life. The wholeness in you is the same as the wholeness in me.

Service is a relationship between equals. Helping incurs debt. When you help someone they owe you one. But serving, like healing, is mutual. There is no debt. I am as served as the person I am serving. When I help I have a feeling of satisfaction. When I serve I have a feeling of gratitude. These are very different things.

Serving is also different from fixing. When I fix a person I perceive them as broken, and their brokenness requires me to act. When I fix I do not see the wholeness in the other person or trust the integrity of the life in them. When I serve I see and trust that wholeness. It is what I am responding to and collaborating with. There is distance between ourselves and whatever or whomever we are fixing. Fixing is a form of judgment. All judgment creates distance, a



disconnection, an experience of difference. In fixing there is an inequality of expertise that can easily become a moral distance. We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch. This is Mother Teresa's basic message. We serve life not because it is broken but because it is holy. (Rachel Naomi Remen, adapted from a transcript in the Noetic Sciences Review.

<http://www.rachelremen.com/service.html>)

“We serve life not because it is broken, but because it is holy.” Remen reminds us that all life is holy and all people, no matter how broken we feel, are whole. We may feel depressed, anxious, or broken in our minds. We may feel broken in our bodies, with knees or hips that don't work the way they used to, with disease or addiction. We might look at others and think of them as broken because they are meth addicts, or chronically unemployed, or constantly angry. But this is not brokenness. If these are our experiences, then they are a part of who we are. They may be wounds, but they don't make us broken.

Knowing this, trusting this, we can look at others with whom we work as whole beings not in need of fixing, and not in need of help, but as beloved, sacred ones who are just like us.

As Paul teaches us, we are all parts of one body, one sacred, living organism: the body of Christ. The Lakota have a similar concept: Mitakuye Oyasin. The phrase means, “we are all related,” or “all of my relatives.” It's such an important part of their spirituality and core cultural system that they say this phrase at the end of prayers, instead of “Amen.” It's a powerful concept because it encourages us to see one another not as others or even as neighbors, but as family. And when we start to see each other as family and as whole beings, part of a larger, whole body or a larger whole family, we stop thinking about helping or fixing and start thinking about serving.

The organization that we partner with at Pine Ridge is entirely about service. Their name is Re-Member, which is a carefully chosen word. Re-Member: It means to pull back together that which has been separated. Their goal is to serve as an ally of the Lakota elders who are trying to re-member their people, their culture and their spirituality. They are also a liaison to the rest of the United States, helping us to re-member our interconnectedness with the Oglala Lakota, helping us to re-member that we are, in fact, part of the same family and same body.

To this end, Re-Member's main focus is to get volunteers to form connections with the Oglala Lakota and with other volunteers. Our week is split into two main parts: Intercultural immersion and work. Every day, we are read wisdom from various Native American elders and every evening, an Oglala Lakota elder speaks with us. We have heard from teachers, spiritual leaders, political activists, tribal counselors, social workers, army veterans, grandmothers, and descendants of survivors from the Wounded Knee Massacre. During part of the week, we visit important sites on the reservation like Wounded Knee, the Badlands, some of the small businesses owned by Lakota, and some of their holy sites.

The rest of the week, we work on the reservation, doing jobs that families have asked us to do, like skirting trailers, building & delivering bunk beds, or building and delivering outhouses. It was when I was delivering bunk beds to a house that I had an experience that I would like to close this sermon with.

Tell story of Rachelle. (on audio)