



Even Silence Is Embraced:
More with Mamisoa Rakotomala
December 7, 2023



Transcript

Sara Hayden: You are actively living out that experiment in your relationships, 'cause I feel that from you. And also in a space that you are cultivating in a new worshiping community. And I'm curious if you could give us some insights into the qualities of brave spaces. What is it that makes a space brave? Or, how do we cultivate moments in communities where it is possible for people to be brave and courageous?

Mamisoa Rakotomalala: It's a difficult space to be-

Sara: Mm.

Mamisoa: ... because to being able even to rise from the floor... I'm using that metaphor because I'm still remembering, again, the many women I encountered while I have a seat and they are on the floor or aside from the table-

Sara: Mm.

Mamisoa: ... because this is what is the norm, it reflect the reality of their life.

Sara: You mean literally on the floor, Mamisoa?

Mamisoa: Yes, literally on the floor, which is part of the culture-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Mamisoa: ... also. But also as I said, have been internalized that this is okay space to be. So, when I talk about courageous space, I think it's where each one of can and does participate, where we can embrace the value and support the diversity of gifts. Where we can contribute together towards the word of love and equality. Where together we flourish and we are aware of the different layers, hierarchy, relationship that may oppress us. And of the quality, if I can say-

Sara: Mm.

Mamisoa: ... of the courageous space is that awareness that we have of those hierarchical spaces. So in those moment, in those spaces, those courageous space, even silence is embraced. Because silence also can say many thing, reveal the vulnerabilities and feelings so that one another embrace that moment, we cherish those moment of vulnerabilities and

feelings. We co-create trust, I would say, to the presence of one another when we care for and when we care with one another, lifting voices this way.

Sara: Mm.

Mamisoa: Conversation can go in different ways in that space where we can continue to grow and flourish. As we model what it is to love one another, love the neighbors as ourselves and love God as well.

Sara: Do you think it's possible to see that happening and experience that mutuality, love of God, love of neighbor in the spaces where things are left unsaid about the hierarchy or marginalization of others?

Mamisoa: I think that's the fear.

Sara: Yeah.

Mamisoa: Any transformation will happen when we realize, when we named the issues, when we named where the relationship, the oppressions are. And I think the courageous space, those moment can happen only if we, as a church, um, as a community uncover those. And again, being courageous enough to say that this is not okay. That is, this is not the love of God and the love of neighbors that we preach.

Sara: Mm-hmm. It shouldn't feel radical to hear a minister say that, and yet it does.

Mamisoa: (laughs) And even listening to me right now, same, so.

Sara: Yeah, it's like, "Oh, that's bold," which is ridiculous because that's the main thing Jesus emphasized. It's like, "Well we don't wanna go too far and say the thing Jesus said was the most important thing."

Mamisoa: Yeah.

Sara: (laughs)

Mamisoa: Is that. (laughing)

Sara: Like what are we even doing if we're not doing that? But I feel that tension as someone who was fortunate to grow up in a place where I felt valued as a leader and had a place, not on the floor, but at the table. It still feels like you're at risk saying, "This is what we're supposed to be about." Because among many things, Jesus said, "Hey, hey, this is what you need to be paying attention to."

Mamisoa: And I think that's why I call them courageous spaces instead of safe spaces, because it's not safe when we name and when we can point, when we talk and cover those oppression, and those relationship which we're not modeling the love of God and the love of neighbors that we preach. And it's more a courageous space to be, because we know that being able to do that require courage.

Sara: Do you have advice or questions that those listening to this conversation alongside of us might consider?

Mamisoa: I think offering space and the church itself, if offering space to have more open dialogues, listening, those are essential practices that I would lift up. And again, as I said before, listening even, it's the long silence. And sitting in the long silence is not easy-

Sara: Mm-mm.

Mamisoa: ... but to be able to be in those spaces of silence without judgment or either trying to understand, or trying to give solution to what's going on. To be able to know what's going on, but trying to be in those moment, the presence of one another in those moment and trust. Because the trust also, when you feel that you don't belong, when you feel that you are estrange, you don't feel the trust. So being able to offer those space of trust so that allowing the relationship to grow that way, dialogue to arise from that inspiring new ideas to face personal, but also the global social violence that we all are encountering in a way or another. So being able to forsert those practices, courageous enough to forsert them.

Sara: Mm-hmm. That knitting together of relationship that comes from honoring the complexity of s- of someone's experience is something that is new, I think, to many in the Protestant American church context. I would say in the white church, especially, where we rush to fix and to solve problems that we think other people have. When someone is to bring a lamentation or a challenge, or a reality to light and the response, the gut response of the institution or the pastor, or, you know, the conversation is to say, "Well have you tried this?" Or, "I know we could put together a team to address this thing." Or, "This should be our priority." I have not, I will admit, often been conscious of the way I moved toward that kind of fixing and how it could serve to devalue the complexity of someone's life experience and the emphasis that they are making in their own spoken testimony of this is what we are facing together.

Mamisoa: Yeah. I still feel that as a pastor, one may see us always having the solutions, right? Coming to us and have all the solutions. And we also embrace that position too, being able to fix everything. But I think switching, like shifting from that position to be able to listen really the need and what, because other people also have the gift and their gifts also matter in all this. And also for the pastor to be able to learn as well as a leader, to be co-learner in the space, not like that I always have the solution for everything. Uh, no, but I also learn in those courageous space and I can also be vulnerable. One of the thing as the pastor, particularly I'm thinking about my church, that I can not show any vulnerabilities because this seems to be weakness for

people. And in those courageous space, I also feel like I can speak, I can be myself, I can be not the pastor, but be with people.

Sara: Wow. That was something Gina Brown was talking about in our last episode in the conversation we recorded. Gina was describing the kinds of spaces that were manifesting. "When there was a sense of comfort, let your hair down," was that phrase Gina used. To know that there were people in the room that understood that there were complexities represented in you that were not all spoken in that space. That you contain those multitudes and there was more to you than what you were saying in that moment, but that was kind of a shared understanding of when we enter this space we see, and it was predominately women-

Mamisoa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... that that was all a part of you, and how liberating that was. And as you said, beginning to understand yourself in the context that you represent the story inside of you. And maybe as a (laughs) precursor to understanding how we're gonna follow God is to understand our lives.

Mamisoa: Yeah. I was talking about taking off our shoes at home and- and relax. Because even at church we, there are some normative ways of being. I remember a story, again in this village where I was, and one Sunday morning I walked, and saw this little girl in front of me. And she was looking at me, and I came to her and I say, "Do you want to go to church with me?" And the way she looked at me, and her response was, "I want to go." And the way she was doing it is like, I don't belong. And she continued with, "I don't have clothes." So even that simple thing-

Sara: Mm.

Mamisoa: ... like there are some practices that used to be when we are in a space and when we don't do those practices, we don't feel the belonging.

Sara: Wow.

Mamisoa: So being able to have the moment, being able to have the space where we just come and be as we are, are important.

Sara: Boy, that really hits home. (laughs) When you think about this child who's yearning to follow you, you know, also as a female pastor, into that place and recognizing the barrier that she has. It's that we have these spaces we fostered where someone will remove themselves from the community because they have the sense that they're not wearing the right clothing-

Mamisoa: Yeah.

Sara: ... or the material possessions that they feel are required to be a part of the worship of God, encountering with God.

Mamisoa: So even those unsaid, those practices that we do something that are unsaid, we feel that it's norm for us-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Mamisoa: ... and we don't pay attention anymore. Those little things makes people that they don't belong to the home that we claim being the home of everyone, being with God and being with people.

Sara: Mm-hmm. Can you imagine a different end to that story with the little girl?

Mamisoa: Uh, yeah. First, I feel like I would've loved that she would see me differently.

Sara: Hmm.

Mamisoa: She saw me as the model of the church, which right now I'm feeling so ashamed and I can name that.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Mamisoa: That she feels that she doesn't belong because she sees me the way I've been dressed and the way I was. And perhaps she also had some other ideas about the church, not just myself as the pastor, but also the ideas about the church. But I would imagine too, if, because she was a little girl, so I would have imagined if she was able to approach if it was a male pastor. If she would be able to say what she would've said-

Sara: Mm.

Mamisoa: ... to me-

Sara: Wow.

Mamisoa: ... if it was a male pastor. Because I feel that a courageous moment-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Mamisoa: ... for her to say-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Mamisoa: ... that she can not be, she doesn't belong, those are the courageous space.

Sara: Wow.

Mamisoa: She was able to say the needs, that she was able to say where she was.

Sara: That's really beautiful, to hear her and what she had to say, and to let that shape you. How many years ago is that? (laughs)

Mamisoa: Wow, like that is like five years ago-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Mamisoa: ... so it stick to me. And all the time when I'm dressed to go to church or somewhere else-

Sara: Aw.

Mamisoa: ... I'll think about her.

Sara: I imagine the kind of agility that like I dream about. And I do think it is available to us. Like practically speaking it would be easier physically to (laughs) say... I'm laughing because this would be like the hardest thing ever to convince a lot of (laughs) churches to do. It would be like, "Hey," and this is me fixing again-

Mamisoa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... but, "somebody just told me that they didn't have the shoes to come to church or the clothes to come to church, so next week let us come in our normal everyday clothes and say, "We have a new policy. We're gonna dress like we always do, because we are always welcome in God's house.""

Mamisoa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: "Come and join us." It's kind of a silly thing to imagine, but in many ways, eh, there are those like signifiers within the church that mark our space as sacred. We define that word sacred as, set apart. This is a sacred space, it's the set apart space.

Mamisoa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: It's special. It's different. It's blessed by God. It's held apart. And culturally speaking, sometimes that means simplicity and- and organic tangible expression of the everyday things of life. Set apart could be a loaf of bread and a cup-

Mamisoa: Yeah.

Sara: ... or a light, but it could also mean an organ and clerical robes, and opulence.

Mamisoa: Yeah. Exactly. I just see space, like, uh, the church role example where, why don't we just have people and don't be in the pulpit, for example, but-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Mamisoa: ... be with the people in a circle, and be just like the people? There will always be some sort of responsibility of the leaders, but more of it is conversation and dialogue than having the way that there is some hierarchy even in those space because of some position or title. Or, sometimes we hide behind the word, because that is my own calling, that is my-

Sara: Mm.

Mamisoa: ... calling as a pastor. But, just be with the people.

Sara: Hmm. Based on this conversation we've just had and your invitation to welcome silence, to meet someone's testimony with deep listening that invites us actually to not respond and fix, I love the idea of all of us listening to this podcast, you and I conversing in this moment, to actually practice that. To take a minute of silence together.

Mamisoa: It's hard. It's gonna be hard-

Sara: (laughs)

Mamisoa: ... because, I'm also learning, I can see myself like just jump and say, "What is happening here?" Well, like, I wanna say something-

Sara: (laughs)

Mamisoa: ... right.

Sara: Fast-forward to the outro, yeah. (laughs)

Mamisoa: Yeah, but as say, it's in those space we learn.

Sara: Yeah.

Mamisoa: And as a pastor, this is another posture that we don't have all the responses, we need to say that the silence also is a learning curve and we learn together in those space of silence.

Sara: Mm-hmm. So don't fast-forward. That's our-

Mamisoa: (laughs)

Sara: ... challenge to you (laughs) in this moment. When was the last time you were awake, alert and silent?

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]

Mamisoa: I'm trying to think. (laughing)

Sara: Don't respond.

Mamisoa: I know.

Sara: That was 10 seconds. I love the, take this moment, it's been a long time, we know.

[30 SECONDS OF SILENCE]

Mamisoa: That was deep. Yeah. Even the moment to be able to quiet ourself in those moment of silence are very deep.

Sara: Yeah, it started weird and then it started being pretty great. (laughing) It's like what people say about running who actually run. That first quarter mile is always a slug (laughs) and then you get into it, and there's flow. Yeah.

Mm, I love practicing this way of being with you, Mamisoa. You're someone I admire very deeply and I feel honored to have this conversation with you, and the silence.

Mamisoa: Thank you for having me and thank you for listening to the whole that I (laughs) have throughout, to this space. Also, to really kind of making the space for me to be courage, it's enough to open up and say the things that's happening around church, community, everyday life.

Sara: Hmm.

Mamisoa: Thank you so much.

Sara: Thank you.