



TRAIL THOUGHTS

TREKKING TOWARD GOD'S ADVENTUROUS FUTURE

A QUARTERLY PASTORAL LETTER FROM PAUL MUNDEY, MODERATOR, CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

WINTER 2020

PRAYER

GREETINGS IN THE STRONG NAME OF JESUS!

It's tempting to think of prayer as tame, but I don't tend to go there anymore.

Last May, our then 22-month-old grandson was accidentally burned over 10% of his body. The details are not important, but it was a horrific experience. We felt we were suspended in an emotional bubble as the rest of life appeared to pass us by, unaware of our crying need. The one exception were the persons who reached out encouraging prayer. At first, I skipped over the significance of that initiative; it was nice, appropriate, but we needed more. Practically, we did, as we reached for skilled medical care. But as we reached for God, a marked change came to our inner being. It was as if we were lifted in our despair and transported—albeit slowly—to a window of promise. Our circumstances didn't change—resolving trauma is an extended, wrenching process—but our soul was fed and fortified in unpredicted ways.

Prayer does that. It feeds and fortifies us in trauma as it keeps us connected to God and others. Prayer is not readily quantifiable or dissected, but we dare not skip over it or view it as tame; in fact, prayer is an effective enterprise used by God to advance God's resources, making all things new, even in traumatic circumstance. In his classic, *Prayer*, George Buttrick suggests this as he quotes George S. Stewart.

“No situation remains the same when prayer is made about it. There are influences of many kinds... operating in every cause and in every soul...[having] power...in the battle between good and evil, but the decisive and essential factor...is the loving power of God called forth—or rather *made way for*—by the...prayers of Christian folk. For a time, things may seem to go on much as before—but the *decisive power has entered in*—and even mountains must move. *Prayer always creates a new situation.*”¹ (emphasis added)

Let that last phrase linger: prayer always creates a new situation. For as Stewart notes, when we pray, we call forth God, making a way for God's decisive power.

We need to call forth God. We need to make a way for God's decisive power, for have you noticed trauma is rampant and severe? For starters, we live in one of the most polarized, conflicted times in recent memory. Rather than finding middle ground, we tend to migrate toward the extremes—left or right, progressive, or conservative—driving our “tent stakes” deeper into the turf of our respective camps. In 2018, a national research study, *Hidden Tribes*, confirmed this reality.

“...growing numbers of Americans are segregated into echo chambers where they are exposed to fewer alternative ideas and fed a constant stream of stories that reinforce their tribal narratives. Over time, this environment spawns increasing extremism...”²

Extremism is not God's will; empathy is God's will, as we identify even with our fiercest foe as neighbor (Luke 10:25-37). A neighbor focus is critical, for trauma and conflict often stir among God's people. Just look at Paul's letters to the early churches—the majority were written to address conflict, even division. But Paul encouraged early believers to reach beyond division, to each other and to Jesus, nevertheless. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians are clarion and

convicting: “Some are saying, ‘I am a disciple of Paul,’ [or Apollos, Peter, Christ]. But let me ask you, is Christ divided up into groups? Did I die on the cross for you?” (1 Corinthians 1:12-13 TPT).

And so, a challenge. Think of a person in your church-life you’re at odds with—a person from whom you are divided and distant, perhaps in a different “camp” or “tribe.” Then, for the next 90 days, add that person to your prayer list and pray for them by name, in *Jesus Name*. I can’t detail outcomes, but I do know, as George S. Stewart affirms, a new situation will be created.

I’m thankful a new situation is being created for my grandson. Over time he is healing in a hopeful way. I’m also thankful a new situation is plausible for each of us individually and corporately as the church. The nature of healing and prayer will vary for each situation—please hear this. But in some new-creation-way, life will be redeemed and restored through God as we pray. The outcomes won’t always be identical to past circumstances, but they will reflect God’s fruitfulness, sanctuary, and safety.

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Willa Cather recounts the story of the Acoma Indians. Rather than restricting themselves to the Colorado plains, the Acoma Indians lived on mesas, even though accessing mesas required squeezing through narrow rock staircases. It was worth the discipline and effort because outside the mesa, the Acoma Indians were vulnerable to attack and the trauma of life: “...the sand was forever blown in new eddies, the clouds forever drifted...” But on the mesa, the Acoma Indians found fruitfulness, sanctuary and safety: “...earth and sky were in ceaseless change, but the mesa was fixed in the midst of fleeting time...”³ Reflecting on Cather’s account of the Acoma Indians, George Buttrick reflected:

“Our generation...with body bruised, longs for sanctuary, for fruitfulness, for an abiding Home. Prayer [leads] to the true Mesa...[For] prayer is the rock staircase to an inviolable sanctuary, a courage to win fruitfulness from [threat and trauma], and a home, even amid earth’s challenges, in the Eternity of God.”⁴

I encourage us to access the rock staircase of prayer and find fruitfulness, sanctuary, and safety in God’s mesa, in Christ. Much threatens us as people and the people of God, but new situations are created as we pray despite trauma. For prayer is not passive, but a calling forth of the Eternal God and God’s decisive power.

With expectation,



Paul Munday, Moderator, Church of the Brethren

Discussion Starters / Questions

1. Think of a time when you were in trauma. Did persons offer to pray for you? What difference did you experience—if any—as a result of the prayers of others?
2. George S. Stewart declares that prayer calls forth God, making a way for God’s decisive power. God can show up and exercise energy without our prayers—after all, God is Sovereign. Why then is prayer necessary and vital to our communion with the Almighty?
3. One expression of trauma is polarization, as many migrate to the extremes, huddling in “camps” or “tribes,” e.g., conservative, liberal. What first steps might we take to move from extremism to empathy, seeing each other as neighbors despite our differences?
4. Through prayer, we connect in fresh ways to God’s fruitfulness, sanctuary, and safety, but such outcomes manifest themselves in varied ways. Describe an instance when you had your doubts God would come through, but over time experienced God’s faithfulness, nevertheless.

To Dig Deeper

George Buttrick. *Prayer*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1942.

Timothy Keller. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. New York: Penguin Books, 2016.

¹ George Buttrick. *Prayer*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1942, p. 106.

² Hidden Tribes, <https://hiddentribes.us>, p. 118.

³ Buttrick, 22.

⁴ Buttrick, 22-23.