



TRAIL THOUGHTS

TREKKING TOWARD GOD'S ADVENTUROUS FUTURE

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

FALL 2020

EMPATHY

GREETINGS IN THE STRONG NAME OF JESUS!

Division continues to advance. Whether it's division in our body as we fight-off COVID-19, division in our country as we fracture over a contentious election, or division in the church as we label each other rather than cherish each other, we are tearing apart.

Recently, historian Jon Meacham reflected on cultural division. Surprisingly, he remarked: "division is part of the oxygen of democracy." The problem: most are unwilling to learn from "the other," typecasting "the other" as an enemy rather than a companion. But we are companions. Thus, Meacham calls for respect, for "democracies depend on empathy. If we can't see each other as neighbors, we're not going to make it."¹

So too for churches; if we can't see each other as neighbors, we're not going to make it. Thus, among life choices, we must opt for understanding, electing empathy. It's striking that most of the Apostle Paul's letters were written to Christ-followers in conflict. Rather than surrendering to rancor, Paul sought reconciliation. Mind you, such peacebuilding didn't expunge differences; that's unrealistic. But Paul tempered difference, amplifying humanity over hostility. "[D]on't let the passion of your emotions lead you to sin! Don't let anger control you or be fuel for revenge, not for even a day...And never let ugly or hateful words come from your mouth, but instead let your words become beautiful gifts that encourage others...Lay aside bitter words, temper tantrums, revenge, profanity, and insults. But instead be kind and affectionate toward one another..." (Ephesians 4:26-32 TPT).

Such self-control emerges as we view difference as strength, bolstering life. Recently I hiked Half Moon Mountain in the George Washington National Forest. As I trekked, I was engulfed in stunning autumnal beauty, remembering that a prime reason for the glory was the wide variety of species all around me—all kinds of different mammals, leaves, trees, insects, birds. Eager to know specifics, I researched the forest, discovering that surrounding me on that fall day were 40 species of trees, 2,000 species of shrubs and herbaceous plants, 78 species of amphibians and reptiles, 200 species of birds, 60 species of mammals, and 100 species of freshwater fishes and mussels.² Without such variety and difference, the beauty that apprehended me would not have occurred.

But there's more. The variety surrounding me needed to learn to co-exist in a respectful, balanced ecosystem, creating, in the words of *National Geographic*, a "bubble of life." Continuing, *National Geographic* observes, "Every factor in an ecosystem depends on every other factor, either directly or indirectly."³ For example, animals depend on plants for food and shelter, and plants depend on balanced temperature. So too for us: we need a sense of dependence, valuing each other, differences and all. The Apostle Paul underscores this: "Just as the human body is one, though it has many parts...so too is Christ. For by one Spirit we all were immersed and mingled into one single body. And no matter our status—whether we are Jews or non-Jews, oppressed or free—we are all privileged to drink deeply of the same Holy Spirit...Think of it this way. If the whole body were just an eyeball, how could it hear sounds...A diversity is required, for if the body consisted of one single part, there wouldn't be a body at all!" (1 Corinthians 12:12-19 TPT).

The takeaway: a diversity is required to create a bubble of life. Thus, Biden supporters need Trump supporters, and Trump supporters need Biden supporters. Episcopalians need Pentecostals, and Pentecostals need Episcopalians. Younger adults need older adults, and older adults need younger adults. Such mutual respect is a stretch, but needed, for God desires a day, Isaiah reminds us, when "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together...They will neither harm nor destroy...for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:6-9 NIV).

It's important to note that affirming diversity does not preclude discernment. Openness to others is not synonymous with openness to abuse, immorality, and apostasy (e.g., the flat-out denial of Jesus as "Son of God, Savior of the World and the Head of the Church, according to the Scriptures"⁴). But openness to others *does* mean openness to new ideas, broader perspectives, and untraveled terrain. Thus, greater diversity often equates greater discomfort (for all the right reasons) as we plumb the depths of God's Creation, discovering in persons different from us a texture and breadth stretching us toward all God intended us to be. It's interesting to note the value God places on diversity as he addresses the seven churches of Revelation (Revelation 2-3). As God does, it's evident. Eugene Peterson notes that "No single congregation exhibits the wholeness of Christ...[thus] one phrase is repeated without variation [to all] seven churches. 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"⁵ We too need to hear what the Spirit says as it speaks through diversity, for no one of us exhibits the wholeness of Christ. Thus, we have much to learn from "the other" as we empathize with those different, even those with whom we're "over-against."

In 2008, J.K. Rowling, of Harry Potter fame, gave the commencement address at Harvard University. She had two main points: the benefits of failure and the importance of imagination. Persons assumed that Rowling would speak of imagination from the perspective of her creative writing. Not so. Rowling advanced the necessity of imagination from the perspective of stretching toward persons different and divided from us. "Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not...In its...most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared."⁶

And so, I call us to imagination, stretching toward those far from us, envisioning redemptive breakthroughs beyond our most entrenched assumptions. That happens as we dare to engage with those varied and different—opting for understanding, electing empathy. In doing so, "divided we'll stand," transforming division into oxygen and life, not just for us and our tribe, but for all of God's children.

With expectation,



Paul Munday, Moderator, Church of the Brethren

Discussion Starters / Questions

1. Jon Meacham contends democracies require both division and empathy. Why are both elements needed?
2. Reread Ephesians 4:26-32. What aspect(s) of Paul's counsel do you struggle with?
3. Reread 1 Corinthians 12:12-19. Paul observes, "If the whole body were just an eyeball, how could it hear sounds...A diversity is required." Paul's analogy (e.g., the body's diversity) hits home, but often we struggle to affirm diversity in other aspects of life. Why?
4. Moderator Paul contends: "affirming diversity does not preclude discernment. Openness to others is not synonymous with openness to abuse, immortality, and apostasy." Where have you experienced too much diversity, contributing to ill and not gain?
5. J.K. Rowling contends that imagination is "the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared." Who can you imagine empathizing with who is not currently part of your relational network/world?

To Dig Deeper

Lauren Casper. *Loving Well in A Broken World*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2020.

Miroslav Volf. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996.

¹ <https://www.today.com/video/-we-ve-always-been-divided-historian-jon-meacham-says-95306821678>

² <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/gwj/about-forest>

³ <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/ecosystem/>

⁴ <https://www.brethren.org/ac/statements/1991-religious-pluralism/>

⁵ Eugene Peterson. *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*. New York: Harper One, 1988, p. 47.

⁶ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2008/06/text-of-j-k-rowling-speech/>