



TRAIL THOUGHTS

TREKKING TOWARD GOD'S ADVENTUROUS FUTURE

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

GREETINGS IN THE STRONG NAME OF JESUS!

Will Willmon tells of an Episcopal friend committed to eradicating apartheid in South Africa. After months of intense effort, including weeks of lobbying in Washington, D.C., a breakthrough felt distant and dim. Commiserating with colleagues at the Episcopal Church Center in New York City, Willmon's friend was discouraged along with her compatriots; all seemed for naught. But then, unexpectedly, the door to their meeting room flung open, and in walked famed anti-apartheid leader Bishop Desmond Tutu. Tutu sensed the anguish in the room but didn't drop his customary exuberant countenance; instead, he accentuated it. "Well, chappies," Tutu exclaimed, "Why the cast-down faces? Why are you looking so sad? Come on; we've got the resurrection. Let's get busy!"

During my two years as Moderator, I've encountered any number of cast-down faces. It's been a difficult season, marked by an onslaught of pandemic, schism, racism, and violence. But I'm with Tutu: the heart of the Gospel is a Jesus who rises above despair. Such a response doesn't minimize strain and sorrow but keeps it in perspective; lament does not cancel resurrection. As Glenn Packiam notes:

"Lament is not our final prayer. It is a prayer *in the meantime*. Most of the lament psalms end with a 'vow to praise'... Because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, we know that sorrow is not how the story ends. The song may be in a minor motif now, but one day it will resolve in a major chord."¹

I challenge us to sound God's major chord, even as we muddle through a minor motif. The Anabaptists, key influencers of our faith tradition, spoke of "walking in the resurrection." Though there's a future element to resurrection, our forerunners believed there's also a present-tense reality—*now*. The Apostle Paul concurs.

"It stands to reason, doesn't it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he'll do the same thing *in you* that he did in Jesus, *bringing you alive* to himself? When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ's!" (Romans 8:11 MSG, emphasis added)

Our current season of life and faith is arduous, taxing us in compound ways. But Paul is on to something: God is breathing into us, nevertheless. Can you sense God's breath moving...animating? The classic evidence is God's encounter with the prophet Ezekiel.

"The hand of the Lord was on me...and placed me in the midst of the valley, and it was full of bones... He said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' I said to him, 'Sovereign Lord, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophecy over these bones.'... So I prophesied...I heard a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to bone. As I watched, I saw tendons on them, then muscles appeared, and skin covered over them from above, but there was no breath in them. He said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath'... So I prophesied as I was commanded, and the breath came into them; they lived and stood on their feet." (Ezekiel 37:1-10 NET)

I challenge us to “prophesy to the breath,” believing God not only rattles but infuses with the Spirit, empowering us to stand. Jurgen Moltmann is best known for his theology of hope, a belief system advancing God’s resurrection ability today. Among Moltmann’s resurrection convictions is a revisualization of the church as a fellowship of friends.

“Friendship [in Christ] is a new relationship, which goes beyond the social roles of those involved... The community of brethren is really the fellowship of friends who live in the friendship of Jesus and spread friendliness....*by meeting the forsaken with affection and the despised with respect.* Its brothers and sisters cannot choose each other.”² (emphasis added)

Continuing, Moltmann concludes: “The church will not overcome its present crisis through reform of...its ministries. It will overcome this crisis through *the rebirth...of fellowship and friendship among the rank and file*”³ (emphasis added). I call us to a rebirth of friendship in Christ, a resurrection of affection and respect. For as brothers and sisters in Jesus, we don’t choose each other; Christ chooses us, calling us to live together, *even* amid our diversity.

The Human Library is a European movement promoting understanding among diverse persons.⁴ The concept is bold and innovative but straightforward: “borrow” a person much like you borrow a book. The purpose: to learn from someone you normally wouldn’t engage with, especially persons you tend to minimize or normally don’t encounter. For example, you might borrow a single parent if you’ve always lived within a traditional family, or a homeless person if you’ve always had food and shelter. This approach got me thinking: how might a Human Library be “stocked” in the church; what “books,” what categories of people would be eye-opening to have on our “shelves”? Certainly, single parents and the homeless—but I’d love for a progressive believer to be able to borrow a conservative believer; a person puzzled by women in ministry to be able to borrow a woman preacher. You catch my drift. The purpose of “borrowing” and listening is not necessarily to change our convictions but to soften harsh or indifferent hearts, becoming newly awash in understanding—even empathy—toward those we don’t know or tend to disregard.

And so, I call us to walk in newness of life, in resurrection, calling forth dry bones and hearts to live! For “If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we’re a pretty sorry lot. But the truth is that Christ *has* been raised, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries” (1 Corinthians 15:19-20 MSG). Where is life deadened for you, cast down, sad? Where is your spirit eroded, thin, and limping? Christ *has* left the cemetery. Life *can* be raised. Hope *is* alive. Let’s get busy!

With expectation,



Paul Munday, Moderator, Church of the Brethren

Discussion Starters / Questions

1. Glenn Packiam notes: “Lament is not our final prayer. It is a prayer *in the meantime*...Because Jesus is risen from the dead.” How do you keep honesty (lament) and hope (resurrection) in proper balance, avoiding being either too naïve or too pessimistic?
2. Reread Romans 8:11. Have you experienced God bringing you alive to himself through the resurrection power of Jesus? Describe the experience and the difference it made/makes.
3. Jurgen Moltmann believes we must reimagine the church as a fellowship of friends meeting “the forsaken with affection and the despised with respect.” What steps can your congregation take to become a fuller fellowship of friends?
4. Moderator Paul tells of the Human Library. Imagine such a library existed in your congregation, district, denomination. Who’s a person you’d be open to “borrowing” and learning from? Who would be difficult for you to “borrow” and learn from? Why?

To Dig Deeper

Timothy Keller. *Hope In Times of Fear*. New York: Viking, 2021.

N.T. Wright. *Surprised by Hope*. New York: Harper One, 2008.

¹ Glenn Packiam. “Five Things to Know About Lament,” N.T. Wright Online. <https://www.ntwrightonline.org/five-things-to-know-about-lament/>

² Jurgen Moltmann. *The Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p. 316.

³ Ibid. p. 317.

⁴ <https://humanlibrary.org>