

A Church That Trusts in God

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Presidential Address to the Council of Bishops

November 5, 2018

St. Simon's Island, Georgia

The Basement and the Sanctuary

I can still remember the day, a few years ago now. It was an unbearably hot summer day in the deep south of the U.S. Our life's possessions were in a van, spilling over into a couple of cars and a friend's truck. We were in the process of moving into the parsonage of the church to which I had been assigned.

At some point late in the day I walked across the street to the church's sanctuary; someone had entrusted me with the keys. It was a beautiful space, quiet and peaceful, serene and orderly. I stopped for a moment. Then I made my way through a door, and turned left and then went down some stairs, into a little room, a basement, underneath. It was crowded and dark, scary and disordered.

Every church, I suppose, has a place of beauty, for public worship. And every church, I suppose, has a place of storage, an out of the way place, usually underneath everything else and harder to find. In fact, most people don't even know that it's there.

I thought about that basement as I read the 130th Psalm. "*Out of the deep have I called unto you O Lord*".... And just as there are depths in buildings, there are deep places in our lives as well. This is not the poetry of the quiet and peaceful, the serene and orderly. The psalm really is a cry from the depths, from all that is crowded and dark, scary and disordered in our own lives.

Psalm 130 is a word that goes all the way down, to where we live. Some of us, I imagine, have been there. To be depressed is to be pushed down. To be discouraged is to have a deficit of spirit. To be deflated is to have all of the wind taken out of our sails.

We have all been in the basement and in a sanctuary. As bishops, think of the moment you were elected, and escorted before a group of people who had just affirmed your call to this office. Think of the moment you knelt and placed your hand on a Bible and someone you had admired and respected laid hands on you and said something encouraging to you.

Those are holy moments. Stay there for a minute. We have all been in that sanctuary.

Now, think of one of the most troubling days in your life as a bishop. The disruption or some chaos that came to you. The violation of human dignity on the part of a clergy. The need to close a church. Or a betrayal. Or an event of national or international importance, or a natural disaster. Or the death of someone close to you.

We have all been in those places of chaos. We have all been in those basements.

What do you do?

De Profundis

In the tradition of the Latin, the name for the psalm's first words is *de profundis*, out of the depths, out of the deep. I can hear a choir singing Rutter's Requiem here, the bass voices all the way down there, "Out of the deep, have I called unto thee O Lord".

Perhaps we thought the spiritual life would be the comfort of a sanctuary, safe and secure from all alarms. And then we found or find ourselves in the strange and unfamiliar territory of a dark, damp basement.

What do you do?

You cry out to God. You get in touch with the deepest places. It gets real, even profound. The synonyms for profound are severe, deep, deep-seating, intense, overwhelming. It can relate to a state of emotion. But it can also relate to insight: penetrating, discerning, wisdom.

In the depths, in the chaos, in the overwhelming, we discover who we are. And, theologically, biblically, we discover who we are *in relation to God*.

Perhaps we are in this place of discovery as a Council of Bishops.
Perhaps we are in this place of discovery as a United Methodist Church.

Who can we trust?

Israel's fundamental identity was found in the experience of the exodus. In the exodus they called upon the name of the Lord. And the beginning of their salvation was the response: "*I have heard the cries of my people...*" There is an echo of the Exodus in this psalm of ascent, sung as the people walked up together to the temple in Jerusalem. They remembered their story. They knew their condition, their situation, which was real, but they could place it in a context.

Out of the deepest, most chaotic and overwhelming places, we cry out to you, O Lord. And it is a cry, as the English word supplication captures it, for mercy. There is a hint here that the condition of the psalmist can be traced, at least in part, to his own sinfulness.

When we have hit bottom, we learn something about ourselves.
When we have hit bottom, we might as well be honest about it.
When we have hit bottom, we can take some responsibility for the situation.

How do we take responsibility, as a Council of Bishops? We return to our sources. We are grounded, even humbled. We remember the words we have led others to say, acknowledging our own need for them:

We have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have failed to be an obedient church.
We have not done your will,
we have broken your law,
we have rebelled against your love,
we have not loved our neighbors,
and we have not heard the cry of the needy.

Out of the deep, we cry out.

I want to stay with two phrases in that confession:

We have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have not loved our neighbors.

This is of course an echo of Mark 12, the Great Commandment. And these were the very words John Wesley would use to define holiness, being made perfect in love.

If we are honest, we are not there. We are still being made perfect in love. But we are not there.

Most of us, in this room, would appear to be successes. We were blessed, affirmed, elected, lifted up, set apart.

These are words of failure. We have failed to be an obedient church.

The Benefits of Failure

Ten years ago this past summer J.K. Rowling gave the commencement address at Harvard University. She, is of course, one of the world's most influential literary figures.

Speaking to that gathering of students and their families, she spoke about her own journey:

"I think it fair to say that by any conventional measure, a mere seven years after my graduation day, I had failed on an epic scale. An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless. The fears that my parents had had for me, and that I

had had for myself, had both come to pass, and by every usual standard, I was the biggest failure I knew.

Now, I am not going to stand here and tell you that failure is fun. That period of my life was a dark one, and I had no idea that there was going to be what the press has since represented as a kind of fairy tale resolution. I had no idea then how far the tunnel extended, and for a long time, any light at the end of it was a hope rather than a reality."

She would go on to talk about very real struggles, within herself and outside. She would talk about how she came to know herself, her limitations, her will, her discipline. She got more in touch with the evil that she saw in the world, which gave her nightmares. And she began to see the good in the world.

The title of her address was "The Fringe Benefits of Failure and the Importance of Imagination".

She says about the benefits of failure: "Failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me."

The Power of Imagination

And then she goes on, in the address, to speak of the power of "imagination". And I want to suggest that, for us, this imagination is the gift of God that gives us the energy to do that only work that matters.

What is the only work that matters for the Council of Bishops in this season?
What is the only work that matters for twelve million United Methodists around the world?

It begins with coming to know God as God really is. Something remarkable happens when we cry out to God. We learn, at the point of our greatest need, a lot about who God really is. The Psalmist helps us in verse three:

"If you, O Lord should mark iniquities, who could stand?"

When we have experienced failure or are wandering around in some spiritual basement, God is not standing there, sneering at us and saying, *"I told you this would happen!"*

God is not the author of a blog, constantly writing us and telling us how terrible we are!

God is not a detached philosophical idea, at a distance from us, saying *"I told you so!"*

When we have hit bottom, we discover a wonderful truth, in verse four:

There is forgiveness with you.

Martin Luther, the reformer of Christianity, argued that the 130th Psalm taught the basic truth of the gospel. He preached a sermon on this psalm, and in it he said, *“With God alone is forgiveness. If anyone wants to amount to something before God, she must insist on grace, not merit.”*

John Wesley heard Psalm 130 performed as an anthem on May 24th, 1738, that would be 280 years ago, in Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London. That same evening he went into a room on Aldersgate Street, and there he experienced the gospel, in which his heart was strangely warmed by the grace of God.

I have a friend in another denomination, and a few years ago we were sharing our journeys of ministry in a small group. He told us that he had served a couple of very strong churches, was recognized by his peers. And then he went into a deep depression that lasted a couple of years. He went to a therapist. The therapist urged him to leave the ministry. He found a spiritual director who taught him how to pray the Psalms.

Over time he came to what was, for him, something close to the heart of the problem. He said, *“I had turned a religion of grace into a religion of good works and achievement.”*

J.K. Rowling speaking to a group of really bright students; Martin Luther and John Wesley, scholars who knew a great deal about religion; my friend Tony’s testimony. What are they saying to us about failure and imagination?

There seems to be a sort of cottage industry based on the idea that the church has failed, that we as bishops have failed. I am no stranger to the internet!

What is failure?

Failure is the honest scorecard of who we are in relation to God: *If you should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?* It is a rhetorical question, the implied answer being, none of us.

But what if our greatest failure is a failure of imagination?

The Practice of Scriptural Imagination

And imagination, and, to name as a spiritual practice scriptural imagination, which is, in the words of Richard Hays, “The capacity to see the world through the lens given to us in scripture”.

How do we see ourselves and our world, with a scriptural imagination? Sometimes, as the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention.

Two years ago I suffered an accident, falling off a temporary stage at the General Conference in Portland. The result was a ruptured quad tendon, which required surgery, physical therapy, and learning to walk again.

The first part of therapy, a few weeks, was keeping my leg absolutely straight, in something of a cast. The second part of therapy was learning to bend my leg again, to 90 degrees, then 120 degrees. The last part of the therapy was to regain strength in the muscles of the leg.

As I would try to bend my leg more and more each day, there was a strong urge within me not to do that. To stay where I was. To avoid the pain. To keep things fixed and straight.

But I had to teach myself that I could not stay where I was. This was summer. In the fall I wanted to walk my daughter down the aisle in her wedding. I wanted to dance at her wedding (I am a terrible dancer!). I love walking and hiking and I wanted to do all of that again.

So I pushed myself. And I remembered a phrase that a friend would use, “muscle memory”. I needed to teach the muscles in my leg to do the things they once knew how to do. To bend, to support, to be flexible. This was not a mental decision. It was a spiritual practice. It was one day at a time.

The Downward Movement of Grace

I thought of our church, the Methodist family within the whole body of Christ. Once we were a movement. We moved across England, across the U.S., across the planet. This was the purpose of the itineracy. Then, perhaps, over time, we became more rigid, less flexible, more settled and even stuck. Not speaking about you, just reading some of my own situation!

We began to lose members, many of our sanctuaries became sparsely attended, we closed some of our churches. We did harm to each other as we navigated controversial matters that were and are deeply important. In our prayers of confession, we said these words, “we have failed to be an obedient church”. And we needed to say them.

It seemed to be a downward journey, more like wandering in a basement than inhabiting the sanctuary.

What do you do?

It helps to have a scriptural imagination. We can claim the words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 3:

God, who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we all we can ask or imagine...(verse 20).

We can pray the Psalms, this Psalm. It is a Psalm that takes us all the way down, but when you go all the way down, there is a foundation, which we call grace. At the beginning of our movement there was a foundation. It was never about being fixed or rigid. Two weeks ago I had the honor of speaking to the Judicial Council of our church, and a part of that was to appeal to them to see the relationship between our doctrinal standards and our theological task.

One of my teachers, Thomas Langford, wrote these words:

“Doctrine reflects the grasp of the church; theology reflects the reach of the church. To use another analogy: doctrine is the part of the cathedral already completed, exploratory theology is creative architectural vision and preliminary drawings for possible new construction.”

There is a firm foundation. And that foundation is grace. But grace is always God’s unfinished agenda with us. It was never about our achievement or even good works. It was grace. It requires an imagination to see this about ourselves and about each other, a scriptural imagination, but it is there. *“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope”*, the Psalmist continues. It is to watch for the morning. It is to believe in the resurrection. It is to be a part of the possible new construction.

And, conversely, it means that we have not arrived at closure. I am drawn again and again in this season to the Apostle Paul’s words in Ephesians 4, that we

bear with one another in love, that we make every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (verse 3).

Have we arrived at closure on what a way forward looks like? Have we arrived at closure in the conviction that there is no way forward? Have we made every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace? Have we made every effort?

Do we imagine that God is still able to do something that is beyond our own human powers?

To be a people who trust in God is to be a people who have failed, who have sinned, who perhaps have tried as hard as we can and gotten as far as we can in our own strength. Maybe Wesley was there on that Aldersgate evening. Maybe our own denomination, the United Methodist Church, is there in the present moment. Maybe we are there, as leaders, as sit together in this place.

What do we do?

De Profundis. Out of the deep we call unto you, O Lord.

I do not know what is ahead of us, in these next few months. I suspect that you don't know either. Maybe this is our convicted humility.

I do know this. In this Psalm there is the good news. Jesus, goes to the cross for you and me. He is the lamb of God who takes upon himself the sin of the world, who cries out to God, on our behalf. It is, in the end, his church and not ours, his body and not ours.

If this is *not* true, none of this matters. If this *is* true, we can make it. God can deliver us out of our present bondage to a new place. I love the words of the missionary Vincent O' Donovan:

"Do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before."

And so we lead with a scriptural imagination. We become, once again, a movement. In our failure and our need, we discover again that this is who we are. We lead the church, once again, to trust in God.

To paraphrase the words of Charles Wesley, an echo of Psalm 130:

Out of the deep, regard our cries
The fallen raise, the mourners cheer
O Sun of Righteousness arise
And scatter all our doubt and fear.

Sisters and Brothers, there is a way forward. There is a future with hope. Let's go there.

Amen.

Sources: J. K. Rowling, "The Fringe Benefits of Failure and The Importance of Imagination", <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2008/06/text-of-j-k-rowling-speech/>. Tony Robinson, "The Making of a Post-Liberal, in Copenhaver, Robinson and Willimon, Good News in Exile (Eerdmans). John Rutter, Requiem, "Out of the Deep", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQtBLGesRHM>. Richard Hays, "Forming Scriptural Imagination", Panel Discussion at Duke Divinity School, February 11, 2013. Vincent J. Donovan, Christianity Rediscovered (Ossining, NY: Orbis Books, 2003)