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Christ Is Not the King

By Joe Ingle

In his 1925 encyclical “Quas Primas,” Pope Pius XI declared Jesus Christ to be the King. Christ ruled over all creation, including governments. This was a counterpoint to Mussolini coming to power in Italy, and authoritarian movements elsewhere in Europe. “Quas Primas” was a theological statement that also called upon Catholics to become involved in the work of Christ in the world.

Unfortunately, the idea of Christ the King has been co-opted to mean that Christ is kingly. When the Synoptic gospels are read, we find a Jewish prophet from Nazareth, baptized by John the Baptist, teaching and healing throughout Galilee. Galilee was a Roman-occupied province, as was Judea. The only king was Caesar or Herod Antipas, the designate of the Emperor. No one would identify this dust-covered man walking from village to village as a king.

Beginning with Mark 1:14-15, Matthew 5 and Luke 4:18, Jesus of Nazareth proclaims the coming of the reign of God, that it is fulfilled now, and that now is the time to respond. When he teaches how this comes about, it clearly is relational. His teaching knocks down ethnic barriers and religious customs that promote some people over others. The teaching also challenges authority. We are all brothers and sisters. We are all children of God. This message led Jesus into conflict with the religious and state authorities. It resulted in his execution. We scan the gospels in vain for a notion of Jesus as king.

The resurrection appearances in Matthew, Luke and John reveal the experience of some of the earliest followers of Jesus; they felt that he was manifest amongst them after his killing. This story of the Risen Jesus is carried forth in the book of Acts and elaborated from Paul’s revelatory encounter with the Risen Jesus.

As we read about this development from crucifixion to discipleship, the tension Jesus experienced with the religious authorities and the state is manifested with his followers. As the gospels are written to each community and Paul’s letters to the gatherings he has founded in the eastern Mediterranean, the conflict is clear. It is a collision that resulted in Paul, Peter and James being executed.

What characterized these early communities was their implementing the teachings of Jesus by including a diversity of people: slaves, ex-slaves, women, widows, the poor, those of means — all who sought to live out the path of discipleship.

Indeed, the early followers of the Risen Jesus — they weren’t known as Christians until later — proclaimed Jesus as Lord. This is over against the Roman state, which enforced the divinity of Caesar. It is in contrast to the traditional Jewish understanding of the Messiah yet to come. Making or living out the statement “Jesus is Lord” would get one executed. Many were killed by the Romans for that proclamation. And yet the movement spread.

What characterized these early communities was their implementing the teachings of Jesus by including a diversity of people: slaves, ex-slaves, women, widows, the poor, those of means — all who sought to live out the path of discipleship. The book of Acts records some of this sharing of resources, and Roman observers commented on how these communities cared for those the state ignored.

As the followers of Jesus organized through persecution, they structured support for one another. As long as they kept their eyes on the prize, discipleship marked by working with “the

least of these, my brothers and sisters,” the cohesion of the communities appeared to be maintained. However, when the significant community issues became not discipleship but who had the correct interpretation of Jesus Christ, the vision was lost. Hence, there developed warring bishops with varying theological notions. Battles were literally fought, and people were killed. Emperor Constantine, after his conversion to Christianity, called the Council of Nicea to put an end to what he must have regarded as theological foolishness. He needed order, and he wanted an enforceable doctrine for his churches, to which he was bestowing

money and blessing. The Nicene Creed gave him that mandate.

Although we can appreciate the willingness of the churches to cooperate with the Emperor after two centuries of episodic persecution, the church of Jesus of Nazareth was now an official appendage of the Roman Empire. Given what we know of Jesus with his work in Galilee and then Judea, a man regarded as a prophet/messiah had now been reduced to the beck and call of the emperor. Rather than working amongst “the least of these,” the Christians regarded themselves as an extension of the Empire. Now one can see how Jesus of Nazareth had become Christ the King.

One can be grateful to Pope Pius XI for calling Christians to deny the political power of authoritarians and fascists by remembering Christ is King of the universe. However, the Christian church for two millennia has often functioned in a kingly manner. Perhaps it is more appropriate to join with the earlier followers of Jesus who proclaimed — and risked their lives in doing so — “Jesus is Lord.” And we find him not by being kingly but through servanthood. It could be what the farmer/poet Wendell Berry meant when he concluded his poem “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” with these words: “Practice resurrection.” ☿

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front

First published in *The Country of Marriage* (1973).

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.

And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.

When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.

Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.

Listen to carrion — put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts ...

As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go.

Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

— Wendell Berry

The Rev. Joseph B. Ingle is a United Church of Christ minister who leads a weekly Bible study at Christ Church Cathedral in Nashville, Tennessee. Too Close to the Flame: With the Condemned Inside the Southern Killing Machine, is his memoir.

Bodies Groaning for Redemption

By Peter R. Gathje

There is a man outside Manna House groaning. I can hear him through the open window of the laundry room where I am folding towels, preparing for a morning of hospitality. His groan is not loud and not continuous, but occasionally he emits a deep guttural sound. I stand up to look through the window. I can see the man seated at one of the picnic tables. He is hunched over and groans whenever he looks up at the sky. The other guests gathering for the morning have noticed him but do not seem concerned. They are talking, the usual light banter and laughter I hear as guests arrive.

At first, I am not sure what to make of the man's groans. I can tell from the guests that he is not in any immediate physical danger. If he was, they would be knocking on the door asking me to call an ambulance. Is his groan from physical pain? Perhaps. But as I listen, his groan seems more like a lament. A deep expression of the tiredness of being on the streets. I am reminded of what Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." (Romans 8:22-23) Perhaps this man is giving witness to Paul's words.

The man in the front yard is groaning while he awaits the redemption of his body. But his body is joined to the whole creation, as we all know in our bones that the way things are is not the way things ought to be.

Each day I hear the groans from the bodies of those suffering in our fallen creation. War in Iran, Sudan, Lebanon, Gaza and Ukraine, climate change, immigrants harassed and deported, voting rights eviscerated. The moral and political corruption of authoritarian regimes here and abroad. And we see the results of Trumpian cuts to the already fragile safety net for those in poverty. The number of guests at Manna House is on the rise. Groans rightly rise in our bodies, as we await redemption.

I join the man groaning as I turn to prayer. The only way I make it through these days is to hold to the faith that there is a redemption. I deeply want John's apocalyptic vision to be true, "a new heaven and a new earth. ... God's dwelling place will be among the people, ... every tear will be wiped away. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4)

John's vision moves me to listen to the groans of this man and of the world. John's vision animates what we do each morning as we open the doors at Manna House for hospitality. We share with our guests a sacrament of bodily redemption in the showers and fresh clothes, in the hot coffee served, in the haircuts, and in the conversations affirming respect and care.

To do hospitality while listening to the groans, I need a kind of mysticism fed by those first fruits of

the Spirit that Paul mentioned. In this mysticism, I hold together John's vision and the groans of those who come to Manna House, as joined to those of Christ on the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) In John's mystic vision I can see the joy of the risen Christ who steps out of the shower room, leaving the death clothes behind, humanity restored, to join the journey on the road to Emmaus. In this mysticism, I can also affirm the joy of hot coffee served and shared in paper cups each morning, and of bread broken and eaten in the meal served here each Monday night.

With John's vision I am able to hold a faithful joy that the groans are not the last word. The joy points to the way things



Fr. John Guilianì

ought to be. The man on the front porch groaning, and all the bodies groaning for

In John's mystic vision I can see the joy of the risen Christ who steps out of the shower room, leaving the death clothes behind, humanity restored, to join the journey on the road to Emmaus.

redemption are not abandoned; they are welcomed, cared for, showered, clothed and fed. This vision and these sacramental signs sustain me in these days. It is not much to go on, but it is enough. Our bodies are joined with those groaning, including the man in the front yard who came in for hospitality, and together we await redemption. ✠

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Montreat, North Carolina and Gaza, Palestine

A Place Set Apart and Genocide

By Ed Loring

David Payne, Nancy Davis and I journeyed to Montreat and Asheville, North Carolina, on May 31. The purpose of the trip was to visit my special friends Erskine and Nan Clarke, especially Nan, whose health has been difficult for over 15 years. I also wanted to see Open Door folk who live in Asheville, namely Michael Galovic and Tamara Puffer, whose stirring grits at 5 a.m. at the Open Door led to stirring feelings in their hearts.

I first came to Montreat 66 years ago. Like a million other white Christians, I fell in love with the place. After marrying Murphy Davis in 1975, we were regulars. Watching and resisting Ponce de Leon's gentrification, so too did we rue the changes at Montreat from a sleepy village of summer homes and a few winterized houses to the trophy houses which now dominate life inside The Gate.

In the days when I was a white supremacist, the Presbyterian denomination was segregated according to many by the will of Calvin's god. Behind the "race" curtain was a way that white supremacists could keep African Americans around for their labor, but away from the meal table. King experienced The Cloth Curtain as a college student when riding the rails. Lawrence Bottoms, future moderator of the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church, attended meetings at Montreat concerning church missions to the Negro. When mealtime arrived, Reverend Bottoms was escorted behind the curtain to eat among the Black staff. I am sure this gave him relief for a while, as well as affirming the heresy of white supremacy: Black Dr. Bottoms was inferior.

Another example of Christian segregation was exhibited when Dr. King named Sunday morning worship as "the most segregated hour in America." Black people in Montreat were inside The Gate as domestics or kitchen help. They were as unwelcomed at white worship in Anderson



ODC Photograph

Auditorium as Bottoms and other African Americans were at the meal table. Always inventive, a separate church for the one god was built for their worship. I have not been able to verify, but I believe the guest preachers were white. Control is the name of the game. My father-in-law, Rev. Tom Davis, enjoyed going to check the mail when in Montreat. He believed and said

in desegregating the South. Montreat has never been the same. And Dr. Lawrence Bottoms was invited to eat in front of the curtain. My mother, Mary Loring, drove from Charlotte to join my former wife, Pat Hiott, and me to hear this challenging and amazing moment in Presbyterian and Montreat History. Three years later, on the night of April 4, 1968, I promised Martin I

A turning point swept through the denomination when MLK was invited to come to Montreat to speak.

Many were there who opposed the invitation. Threats of violent protests were made if King accepted the invitation.

so on several occasions that the current post office was the building built for Black worship.

A turning point swept through the denomination when MLK was invited to come to Montreat to speak. Many were there who opposed the invitation. Threats of violent protests were made if King accepted the invitation. On August 21, 1965, returning from the Watts Rebellion, Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King stepped forward unafraid in the formerly forbidden venue, Montreat's Anderson Auditorium. Dr. King advocated for the Southern Presbyterian followers of Jesus to become "The Church on the Frontier of Racial Tension," believing the church could lead the way

would go to the streets to fight for social justice. On April 8th, four days later, I was in Memphis, Tennessee responding to Coretta Scott King's call for people to come to Memphis to complete the marred march. Nibs Stroupe was there as well.

Genocide in the Holy Land

For the past year and a half, I have attended a Vigil-4-Palestine in Baltimore. Our aim is to build consciousness of the slaughter and ongoing genocide in Gaza. We hope against hope that two or three empathetic human beings a week will ACT to join forces against the American Empire, the military industrial complex, and the

settler colonial state of Israel, dominated by Zionists and led by Benjamin Netanyahu.

When plans were made to visit Nan, I told our pro-Palestinian fellowship we would hold a vigil in Montreat in solidarity with them. And so we did. The three of us: Nancy, David and Ed.

The Montreat Gate stands tall like a mighty fortress to their god. Cars entering and exiting must slow down. For as Jesus taught, we must enter by a narrow gate. The wall was built before the advent of SUVs. David stood holding his placard so the exiting cars would see without fail. Nancy and I did the same for cars entering. Many drivers ignored us. Others honked their horns or gave us a sign of support. One laughed; another called us an epithet. Not a bad response for witnessing peace and justice in the USA. We planned to Vigil for one hour. All went well for 45 minutes. Then came the police. First one. Then two. Then three.

The first officer of the Montreat Police Department was very white, low-key and appeared inexperienced. He asked me to move back from the road where I was standing. Very politely, I said, “No,” and he was perplexed. For a short while he just stood there looking at me. I think he was looking at my sign. Then he said he would file criminal charges against me. He requested, “Let me have your ID.” I gave him my driver’s license. All the while I stood close to the road and positioned my placard where incoming traffic would have to see my sign. Then I said, “Our vigil will be over in 15 minutes.” He turned and went back to the police station with my driver’s license.

Ah, no police around. I continued to do what I am supposed to do. In a few minutes the policeman returned. With him came “Officer Burley,” as I call him. Officer Burley was a large white man and arriving to handle the problem. “Move away from the road,” he demanded. “No. Our vigil is about to end. We stop at 4 pm.” “Move away from the road. There is plenty of space over there on the ground,” he said pointing toward my companions. “No.”

As Officer Burley began to pick me and my rollator up, I screamed, “Let me go. I am crippled.” I yelled to David to take a

video. The video is incomplete because as I was crashing to the ground, I howled for David’s hand. David took my hand, and I did not hit the asphalt or the earth.

Burley got me moved by the hardest. About this time a police car pulled up on the opposite side of the road. The woman cop just watched, probably recording what was happening. Montreat police do not



**Ed Loring,
David Payne
and
Nancy Davis
at the
Montreat Gate.**



ODC Photographs

wear body cameras. Why should they? I received a lecture that what we were doing does not accomplish anything. Why don’t we do something positive? In a bit I interrupted. “Thank you for what you are saying. People told Dr. King the very same thing.” He paid no attention. Then came a major transition. Stick time was over. Now was Carrot time.

Officer Burley, eyes moist, face radiating with pride, asked, “Do you know this was the home of Billy Graham?” And he

began to describe Billy’s theology, saying Jesus never broke a law, as I was doing. He continued with other such absurd images of the placid Jesus. I interrupted, wanting to have a Bible study on Luke 4:14-30, The Nazareth Manifesto. Here Jesus claims the prophetic mantle of Isaiah and when he claims that Gentiles, especially women, are welcome in his movement, hometown folks attempt to kill him. But, alas, after ten words, the Montreat policeman took over the conversation implying he had no interest in my Bible Study.

From Billy Graham, Burley moved to Montreat. “Those people over there,” pointing to the land beyond the gate, “they are Christians every one. Very nice, quiet and cause no problems. Montreat is,” said he, “a bubble.” Burley wanted to know my age. “I’m 86.” He was surprised. “What do you do?” “I am a Presbyterian Minister.” He seemed a bit concerned.

As he was sharing his truth, a couple of women in love walked over to see what was going on. They worried. The med student said she read my tee shirt from the other side of the street. They were pro-Palestinian. I am thankful for their response. We had a short but empowering conversation.

By this time Officer Burley was ready to go back to the police station. No criminal charges were going to be filed. He and his partner turned to depart. I asked for my driver’s license. Burley turned, handed it to me and continued. The junior officer followed. The police car rolled away. We were now running late for supper with Nan and Erskine. We climbed into the car and up the mountain we rode. A very happy ending.

Then days later, lo and behold, the Presbyterian Church USA took an overdue but bold step. To be of this historic moment in Presbyterian history, like hosting Dr. King in Montreat, is momentous. I wish I could tell Burley what we accomplished. There is a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets through.

As reported on “Democracy Now”: “The largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States has voted overwhelmingly to recognize Israel’s war

in Gaza as a genocide and to divest from Palantir Technologies and General Electric Aerospace over their ties to Israel's military and intelligence services. A measure approved Tuesday by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) also calls on church members to boycott Israeli products and to lobby Congress for an arms embargo against Israel."

Rev. Fahed Abu Akel (a student of mine at Columbia Theological Seminary) offered these words: "We have been silent on the destruction of most of the schools, universities, hospitals, mosques and churches — you know, one church was Orthodox, Catholic and also Baptist — all of which was done with our American-made weapons and dollars. Siblings in Christ, in

the name of the living Christ, we cannot be silent on this matter any longer."
An even happier ending. ✠

Eduard Nuessner Loring is an Activist/ Advocate/Ally at the Open Door Community in Baltimore. Pronouns: he, him, his. (edloring@opendoorcommunity.org)

Martyrs

By Elizabeth Dede

For Koinonia Farm's morning chapel, I choose pieces of art to illustrate the gospel reading of the day. Today's reading is from the Gospel of Mark 6:14-29 and is the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. I found this powerful work of art by 16th-century artist Andrea Solario.

Salome, the stepdaughter of King Herod, performs a seductive dance for Herod and other powerful men, who are wining and dining with him. Herod is thrilled and offers Salome anything she wants — up to half of his kingdom! There aren't many details in the story about Salome. How old is she, for instance? Because



Andrea Solario

The executioner is portrayed only as an arm, which is representative of executioners even today. They are masked; we don't see their faces.

she runs off to ask her mother what she should request, I imagine her to be quite young — early teens, perhaps. Think of these powerful men as they watch a young girl performing a provocative sexual dance for them. Does this scene remind you of Jeffrey Epstein and all the rich and famous men who have used and abused girls and young women?

Herodias, Salome's mother and unlawful wife of King Herod, tells Salome to request the head of John the Baptist on a platter. She does this because John the Baptist has made a public and

prophetic witness against the marriage of Herod and Herodias. Herod is afraid of John because John's prophecy is truthful and mesmerizing. We can imagine that King Herod is aghast — what a horrific request! But he must comply since he has made this promise in front of all these other men. John the Baptist pays for their multitudinous grotesque sins. Who pays today, I wonder? Could it be ten-year-old Elizabeth Zuna Caisaguano, who was kidnapped, along with her mother, by masked, armed ICE agents as she was walking to school in Minnesota? Elizabeth

and her mother, legally here in the U.S. and certainly not dangerous criminals, spent a month in an ICE prison in Texas before they were released after being exposed to a measles outbreak in the prison. Who pays for the sins of the rich and powerful today?

Look at this beautiful piece. Solario portrays Salome as a pretty young girl dressed in fine clothes. Her face is rosy, yet she does not look cheerful: her eyes are downcast, her lips turned down. If her coloring were different, you could almost imagine that she is about to vomit into the platter, mixing her sickness with the blood of John the Baptist. The executioner is portrayed only as an arm, which is representative of executioners even today. They are masked; we don't see their faces. In execution chambers across the U.S.,

they are anonymous, as is this executioner pictured by Solario. John the Baptist's color is all drained away, his blood dripping into the platter. Does this remind you of the blood-soaked airbag in Renee Good's car? Yet, John is at peace. Look at his face. There is no tension; his mouth is open in a sigh of relief. The terror is past.

How many more martyrs will there be? ✠

Elizabeth Dede is a longtime member of Koinonia Farm and is the ministries coordinator there. Prior to her membership at Koinonia, she worked at the Prison & Jail Project with John Cole Vodicka, and before that she was a Partner at the Open Door Community for 15 years.

Bullet Points

I will not shoot myself
In the head, and I will not shoot myself
In the back, and I will not hang myself
With a trashbag, and if I do,
I promise you, I will not do it
In a police car while handcuffed
Or in the jail cell of a town
I only know the name of
Because I have to drive through it
To get home. Yes, I may be at risk,
But I promise you, I trust the maggots
Who live beneath the floorboards
Of my house to do what they must
To any carcass more than I trust
An officer of the law of the land
To shut my eyes like a man
Of God might, or to cover me with a sheet
So clean my mother could have used it
To tuck me in. When I kill me, I will
Do it the same way most Americans do,
I promise you: cigarette smoke
Or a piece of meat on which I choke
Or so broke I freeze
In one of these winters we keep
Calling worst. I promise if you hear
Of me dead anywhere near
A cop, then that cop killed me. He took
Me from us and left my body, which is,
No matter what we've been taught,
Greater than the settlement
A city can pay a mother to stop crying,
And more beautiful than the new bullet
Fished from the folds of my brain.

— Jericho Brown

Dr. Jericho Brown was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1976 and received his doctorate degree from the University of Houston. He currently is the Charles Howard Candler Professor of English at Emory University. He won a MacArthur Fellowship in 2024 and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2020.

God at the Center

By Nibs Stroupe

This sermon is based on Psalm 84 and was preached on May 17 at Presbyterian Church of the Resurrection in Conyers, Georgia.

Our family's first dog was a Sheltie named Silver, who was born at Caroline's parents' home in Chattanooga. Caroline's mother, Martha Leach, raised collies, and she raised and trained Silver — yay for her! We got Silver for our son David's sixth birthday, and he was a great dog for our family.

Every now and then, we would drive up to Chattanooga from Atlanta to visit Caroline's parents, and since Silver was a good traveler, we would take him up with us for the visit. As we got off the expressway and turned on to the winding road that took us to their home in the woods, Silver would recognize where we were going. Then he got all excited — he knew that he was going to his birth home! He would begin to bark and jump all around the car, and when we arrived, he could not wait to get out of the car. He knew that he was home!

Whenever I read Psalm 84 or any others like it that express joy in going to the Temple, I think of Silver's joy in recognizing that he was going back home:

How lovely is Your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!

My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the Lord.

My heart and my flesh sing
for joy to the living God.

Scholars think that Psalm 84 is likely a song that the pilgrims sang as they made their way to the Temple in Jerusalem. Judaism required that Israelites make the journey to the Temple on three occasions during their lifetimes — Passover, Pentecost and Sukkoth (the Festival of Shelters). This praise song in Psalm 84 was likely sung by these pilgrims at the Festival of Shelters, when Jewish people were required to build temporary shelters on the streets and to live in them for seven days. This was done as a remembrance that they used to be held in slavery and that they were homeless. Not many Jewish people do this now, but many still will build small

lean-tos in their homes as a reminder and a celebration of the season. The Open Door Community in Atlanta used to have an annual observance of the Festival of Shelters during Holy Week, when people were invited to join them in sleeping on the streets of Atlanta, to join the homeless people there.



John Overmyer

This pilgrimage is rooted in joy and in remembering — the joy of gathering with sisters and brothers in community to worship God together. There is such delight expressed in this Psalm about coming to

I had this sense of delight in going to church at First Presbyterian in Helena, Arkansas, where I grew up. First Presbyterian helped me to learn my true definition as a child of God.

the Temple, conveying a powerful sense of gathering together in the name of the Lord. One of the worst parts of COVID was this inability to gather together, the lack of incarnation of the people of God. Though we could get together online, it was just not the same. And, as we regathered in person at the end of COVID, there was a great joy of being together.

I had this sense of delight in going to church at First Presbyterian in Helena, Arkansas, where I grew up. First Presbyterian helped me to learn my true definition as a child of God. My father had abandoned me and my mother when I was an infant, and I never heard from him again until I was a young adult — he never called me, never came to see me, never contacted me when I was a child. Because of this, I began to define myself as a boy abandoned by my father — what was wrong with me

that would cause him to abandon me? First Presbyterian taught me a different definition of myself: I was a child claimed by God the Father and Mother, whom we know in Jesus Christ.

It was a powerful affirmation and learning for me, and I will always be grateful to First Presbyterian in Helena for teaching me about the grace and love of God in a very personal and down-home way. If you want to know more about this story, see my latest book, *She Made A Way: Mother and Me in a Deep South World*.

In the midst of our celebrating the people of God and the church communities formed by them, we should remember that today, this Sunday, May 17, is the 72nd anniversary of a monumental decision by the Supreme Court of the United States in *Brown v. Board of Education* in Topeka, Kansas. It was a unanimous decision that overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896, which had codified segregation and neo-slavery. It was a huge decision, one of the most important in the history of the court.

I don't remember that decision — I was seven years old at the time — but I do remember how upset that decision made white people in the South. There was massive resistance to it in the white South, but ironically enough, the first national church

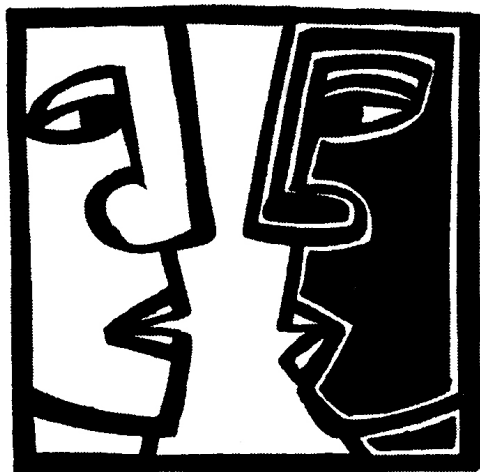
body to meet after the *Brown* decision was the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), the old Southern Presbyterian Church before reunion in 1983. The PCUS General Assembly met in Montreat that year in June, 1954. Oakhurst was part of that, as was your predecessor church, Lithonia Presbyterian Church.

The PCUS General Assembly in 1954 stunned everyone when it essentially affirmed the *Brown* decision. Here is part of what they said:

That the General Assembly affirm that enforced segregation of the races is discrimination which is out of harmony with Christian theology and ethics and that the Church, in its relationship to cultural patterns, should lead rather than follow. That the sessions of

local churches admit persons to membership and fellowship in the local church on the Scriptural basis of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ without reference to race.

These statements sent shock waves through the denomination. My beloved home church in Helena was one of those churches in shock over this courageous General Assembly pronouncement, because no Black people were allowed in my home church, except to cook and clean. Every Southern Presbyterian church had to make a decision in those days — allow Black worshippers, allow Black members, or not. Most of our churches decided not to allow Black worshippers.



Rita Corbin

Race was a powerful opponent of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the South in those days. We tried to hold race in one hand and the Gospel in the other, but the Brown decision made it illegal, and the PCUS General Assembly said that it was un-biblical. Oakhurst Presbyterian, where Caroline and I were co-pastors, lost 90% of its white membership when the Oakhurst Session voted to allow Black worshippers in 1963. Your predecessor church, Lithonia Presbyterian, had to make a decision on this issue — what was their decision? Check out your Session minutes to find out what y'all decided in those days.

White churches all across the South had to make a decision on this — not just Presbyterians, but Baptists and Methodists, Episcopalians and Roman Catholics. We all had to wrestle with whether race or God was at the center of our lives, and most of us chose race over God in those days. Indeed, we've had rounds of fights in the

church over who is welcome and who can lead in the church. We've fought over Black people, over whether women can be leaders in the church, over whether gay and lesbian and trans people can be members. We've fought over who is welcome in the church, and our resistance to those whom God is sending us has been costly. Mainline churches in America have gotten a reputation for being closed-minded, mean-spirited and exclusive. Because of our resistance to those whom God is sending us, fewer and fewer people are showing up at our doors. Fewer and fewer people are saying, "My soul longs for the courts of the Lord."

We are steadily losing members. My beloved home church in Helena is now closed because they wouldn't welcome people whom God was sending them. My

Mainline churches in America have gotten a reputation for being closed-minded, mean-spirited and exclusive. Because of our resistance to those whom God is sending us, fewer and fewer people are showing up at our doors.

ancestors' beloved Presbyterian church in Mississippi is now closed for the same reason. The national Presbyterian church is shrinking fast. When Caroline and I came to the Atlanta Presbytery in 1983, there were over 55,000 Presbyterians here. Now, there are just over 29,000 — a dramatic drop. Our resistance to those whom God is sending us has been costly. But it doesn't have to be this way. There is a way back to where the church can be a place where people want to come, where they once again say: "My soul longs for the courts of the Lord."

How do we do this? How do we get there? Well, as usual, Jesus shows us the way. In the tenth chapter of Luke, he encounters a lawyer who wants to know how he may attain eternal life. Their conversation leads to the two Great Commandments. First, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind." The emphasis of this first Great Commandment is that before everything else, God must be at the center of our individual and communal lives — not race, not gender, not money, not sexual orientation, not war, not redemptive violence, not the USA, not Trump, not MAGA, but rather God must be at the center of our lives and of our life together.

And the second Great Commandment from Jesus points us back to the first — how do we know if we have God

at the center of our lives? By how we treat our neighbor: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." And the lawyer, being the lawyer, asks Jesus, "And just who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with a radical parable, the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the one who helps the injured Jewish man is the hated enemy, the Samaritan. Who is our neighbor? The one whom we thought was our enemy!

So, that's the formula for the church to begin to turn ourselves around. Love the Lord your God — put God at the center. We often say that we do, but our actions show otherwise. Love your neighbor as yourself — and the neighbor is the one we thought was our enemy. So, let's start living that way, church. Let's start seeking out those whom we know are on the margins of life.

They just might be the ones whom God is sending us. And, in that movement, we might just start meeting God there. We might just start hearing people KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK on our church doors, saying remarkable things to us, things like "my soul longs for the courts of the Lord." What would it be like if people started coming to our doors with that feeling?

God is calling us in this moment, this time, this place to go out into the world to proclaim a simple but controversial truth: the diversity that God has created is not a problem, it is rather a gift. It is an opportunity for us to be able to weave together the human family as God intends us to be, to live as siblings, one to the other. We belong to God, and we belong to one another in the name of Jesus Christ. God at the center and loving our neighbors. If we go this way, people will be pounding on our doors. Let's go try it! Amen. ✠

Nibs Stroupe is a longtime friend of the Open Door, retired pastor and author of Deeper Waters: Sermons for a New Vision and She Made a Way: Mother and Me in a Deep South World. He and Catherine Meeks are authors of Passionate for Justice, a book about the life and witness of Ida B. Wells for our time. He is managing editor of Hospitality. He writes a weekly blog at www.nibsnotes.blogspot.com. (nibs.stroupe@gmail.com)

Grace and Peaces of Mail

You guys don't know me, very well at least. My name is Natalie Milan. Short, short-haired, lil lesbian-looking chick, who for about two years very much stayed alive from your Pantry Box out front.

I grew up in Hamilton and have always loved city life. I live in Harford County now, going on two years. A break from the city I didn't know I needed. I lived above Racer's on Harford and Taylor Ave for about 6 years.

I met a woman seven years older than me. Thinking she had her addiction figured out and she's older than me, I felt that she'd know when to quit and put me in my place with my own substance abuse issues.



Photographs by David Payne

That's not at all what happened. I came from a family of drugs and alcohol being regular and ok, because we also got up and made it to work. Until the logical one became the scapegoat due to one specific relationship.

Look, there's a lot of people out here taking you and what you do for granted, but there's a few out here like myself. We understand the psychological warfare the people you help are going through.

That struggle and having a kind heart led me to fall into my own depression, and it won for a couple of years. You are a part of what kept me alive, physically and mentally, and now I strive to be your level of strong.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am working full time, back on my own, and going to school for Psychology. You helped me remember who I am and what I am capable of. As I can I will contribute more.

You're a miracle worker and saving lives.

With love always,
Natalie Milan
Baltimore, Maryland

Dear Nibs Stroupe
and Open Door Community,
Thanks for your information and
yearly calendars!

Sr. Madonna Friedman
Dubuque, Iowa



The Welcome Pantry at the Open Door.

Dear Nibs:

A cancer diagnosis divides one's life in two. There is life before cancer (BC) and life after the diagnosis (AD). Few life events do that.

What a cancer patient needs is good medical care and the love and support of family and community. Fortunately, Murphy had both during the 25 years she lived after her "terminal" diagnosis of Burkitt's lymphoma. She lived fully, despite two surgeries and six rounds of chemotherapy. She worked hard and enjoyed celebrations and time with her family, friends and granddaughter. She had much help and had her own deep faith. Although it was hard to read of her suffering, Murphy's book, *Surely Goodness and Mercy* helps bring a deeper appreciation of life. It teaches us to love one another and do good works.

Sincerely,
Virginia Soules, M.D.
Atlanta, Georgia



HOSPITALITY

HOSPITALITY is published by the Open Door Community, Inc., Baltimore, Maryland. The Open Door is a Prophetic Discipleship Community honoring the Black Jesus, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. Manuscripts and letters are welcomed. Inclusive language editing is standard.

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HOSPITALITY *prays*

Prayer is the heart of a genuine Christian radicalism. — Ron Ferguson



Ricardo Levins Morales

Prayer for Loving the Stranger

"I was a stranger, and you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35c)

O loving God, you have walked with us through the ages.
You created the earth, our home.
You led us out of bondage when we were enslaved in Egypt and Babylon.
You called us into relationship with You,
and when we failed to be faithful,
your prophets called us to obedience and justice.
Then, in your ultimate act of love, You sent Jesus...
who embodied your love for all people;
who turned enemies into table guests;
who avowed that the way we treat strangers reflects how we love God.

Yet, in our day,
we are taught to fear those who are of another race, ethnicity, or nationality;
we are warned that strangers are our enemies, that they kill, steal and rape;
we make inhumane, unjust laws that penalize aliens, and
we build walls that symbolize our disdain of those who don't look or act like us.

We confess, O God,
that the internal war within each of us is a moral battle
between our learned fears and your call to love strangers;
that we easily assume that You have abandoned us
to fight this moral battle all on our own,
despite your promise always to be with us.

So, we pray now...
for courage to welcome strangers;
for faith that emboldens us to be hospitable to those who are different from us;
for strength no longer to fear the stranger;
for wisdom to distinguish between your voice
and the voices of those who abuse or neglect the poor;
for our children to enjoy a world free of racism, militarism, and nationalism;
for holy remembrances of the countless ways You have walked this journey with us;
for abiding trust that You will always be at our side in our quest for justice and peace.
Amen and Amen.

— Lee Carroll

Lee Carroll is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and Associate Professor Emeritus of Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. He is the current chair of the Board of Directors of the Open Door Community. (lc Carroll@ix.netcom.com)