

Reflections on Our Experience Together: Transcending the Buffer Zone

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Texts: Isaiah 43:18-19

Luke 17:20-21

The kingdom of God is among you.

The Greek word *entos* can be translated “within you,” “among you,” “in the midst of you.” Note that the “you” is always plural. None of us by ourselves is in a position to claim the kingdom of God. Only together—as the Partnership Think Tank report suggests—only together does that happen.

According to the commentaries on the Luke passage, the Pharisees are asking about material benefits: When is it going to get here? What’s in it for us? Jesus caught the nuance. The kingdom of God is not “stuff” you can lay your hands on. No, it is something else.

There is a **new reality**—a new way of being that is already here—but not yet reaching culmination. A new thing—can you not perceive it? A new way of being in relationship. Well, we are products of the American culture; and we are Presbyterians. We want to know: where is it? How will we know it when we see it?

Somewhere in our being **we already know it**. Sometimes when we have our wits about us, when our hearts are in the right place, when nothing more enticing or immediate shows up to distract us, we have glimpsed something—a truth we cannot forget.

We know there is a new way of being—a new reality. We have written it into our *Constitution*, especially in those first four chapters in our *Form of Government*. The plural “you” indicates that the journey is made in relationships; the *Book of Order* lays out those relationships. Jesus Christ has formed the church and has given us what we need to do his mission. In chapter three we read of the new reality that is to be lived. Sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and dividing walls of hostility are broken down. It is a new way for the world to be in relationship—and the church is called to be a sign. What a wonderful vision coming from God’s heart.

What did Jesus mean by his response to the Pharisees? Where do **we** see the kingdom of God?

As Presbyterians we have a tendency to jump immediately to the task or the responsibility. How can we get it organized? How can we write the *Constitution* the right way so that we can make it happen?

The answers for us seem to come too often suggesting that it will depend on us; and we slog through piles of paper and documents, seeking the way. But can we organize it? Or is it something for which we can only wait—patiently or impatiently, depending on our particular temperament—until God takes the steps that only God can take?

These questions are not resolved easily, and I surely would not suggest that I have an answer today—only the question. How can we participate in this new reality? And is the activity ours or is it the movement of God in our time?

Let me tell you a story to illustrate the question.

Recently I attended a conference in Cyprus—that 200 mile-wide island where Paul and Barnabas walked so many years ago. The conference, with the theme “Make us instruments of your peace,” was sponsored by the World Council of Churches in an effort to move toward the decade to overcome violence. People from twenty-one countries and every continent except Antarctica were there. All gathered to share in experiences that would encourage us toward peace-building.

In that conference we journeyed a short distance to a town called Pyla—a town that carries the privilege of being right on the line between Turkish Cyprus and Greek Cyprus. In the early 70s, the Turks had occupied the northern third of the island. Since 1974, the United Nations has been present in a buffer zone on what is called the Green Line. People from the southern Greek side are not allowed to cross without a great many bureaucratic machinations and the same is true for those on the Turkish side crossing to the Greek side. There is much bad feeling on both sides—distrust and anger. One sign read, “If you trust a snake, you can trust a Turk.” Pyla sits right on the line.

We met Nicos (Greek) and Uluz (Turkish). More than a decade ago, Nicos was pondering the despair of living so close and yet so far from his neighbors on the Turkish side of the Green Line. He had known some friends when he was a school child himself living on what is now the Turkish side. He had not seen or heard from them in more than twenty years. So he, being a school teacher, decided to ask his students to write letters to school children in a school across the buffer zone. They did. Uluz, a teacher in the school that received the letters, had lived on the Greek side when he was a child and remembered friends from that side. He asked his students to respond to the letters. The upshot of the story is that these two men began the Youth Encounter Program where they each bring their students into the buffer zone to meet each other and to play games, tell stories, and generally celebrate their common situation as youth. Since the students had written to each other, in these encounters, they recognized the names of their pen pals and were overjoyed to meet them. They are now in the eleventh year of these youth encounters.

You can see how these activities will make for a new reality in the long run. A generation of youngsters who have connected across the Green Line will not be the same. Now the question: is this the action of Nicos and Uluz and all those kids as bearers of peace, or is it God moving to establish a new thing—transcending the cultural hostilities of either side to bring about the kingdom of God?

I'm sure you have numerous stories of your own in which you or someone you know has entered the same kinds of relationships and discovered a new reality as a result. I've seen it in sessions, presbytery, in my community, among my friends, and, no doubt, you have too.

Another story drove this home for me. At the Cyprus conference I met a young woman named Lara—from Bethlehem, from Palestine. It had taken her three days to get out of her country—past all the checkpoints that resulted from the Israeli occupation.

Our nations were and are in deep differences of understanding. Given the statements the president of my country had been making, Lara had voiced, along with many others in the group, her strong feelings of opposition to the stand my country was taking. She had shared the news of a family in Bethlehem who, thinking the curfew had been lifted for a few hours, ventured out to get food for their household. They were shot and killed—a mother and her two children. You can imagine her feelings of sadness and anger at that and other happenings.

On this particular morning during our worship, we were passing the peace of Christ—instructed to do so in silence, using only gestures of peace. When Lara and I passed the peace of Christ, we hugged. She broke the “silence” rule and whispered in my ear, “I feel like I'm hugging my mom.” Immediately, tears came to my eyes. I was so grateful for her gesture of peace. She transcended the differences between us and moved our relationship to one of deep connection. Her humanity and mine met in that gesture, those words. She could not have known that mother—mom—is a role so meaningful to me. I consider giving birth to and rearing my children to be one of the most creative and peace-building acts in my life. Lara offered a gift to me that touched a deep part of myself.

I knew from having listened to Lara that her mom was very important to her. Her love for her mom was part of her anxiety about the war raging in her town and in her country.

And she passed that love to me—someone who would have been an enemy if she had not been able to walk in God's paths. I know she had not intended to bring that gesture of peace. She was moved by the moment of connection and she placed her love on my heart. This is the new covenant mentioned by Jeremiah: “I will write it on their hearts...and they will be my people.”

The question is: was Lara the one who was acting, or was God doing what only God can do?

I think I know, don't you, that it was a blending of the two. God so loves the world—the world—that God gives us the ability to walk in God's paths, if we are willing. That is true whether we organize something to happen or whether we don't. All over the world, in every place—not just in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), though certainly here, too—we can see it. We can learn from others. Though it may seem otherwise so much of the time when we read the news; in fact, people everywhere are living the new reality beyond

the cameras and reporters, quietly, in a multitude of places. God's heart can and will move us—is moving us—like Nicos and Uluz, and Lara, to see the beautiful vision of a new reality; to transcend the narrowness of our own experience; where sin is forgiven, the dividing walls of hostility are broken down, and reconciliation occurs.

We live in common faith that the God of all the universe can hold us in the light of God's presence and move the likes of us to be bearers of the vision of a new way of being. That is the way of our God! That is the new reality for which the church is formed. The kingdom of God is in our midst.

What is your story? When have you been in a relationship that reflects this new reality? How will we be bearers of peace today and tomorrow?

O God, open our hearts to see it--and let it be so!