

“So That They May Become One In Your Hand”

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When Cardinal Heenan of Westminster and Archbishop Fisher of Canterbury met some decades ago in what was the first meeting ever between the leaders of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches in England, Cardinal Heenan, the Catholic, is reported to have said to Archbishop Fisher, the Anglican: ***“Isn’t it wonderful, you and I both serving, both worshipping the same God, you in your way, and I in His.”***

In the decades since, attitudes have changed in astonishing ways, ecumenically speaking, due in part to much hard work by those who have labored tirelessly in the ecumenical vineyard, but largely because of the unceasing prayers of countless Christians across our country and around the *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited earth. We give thanks for the ceaseless prayers offered specifically during the January 18-25 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity over the last 101 years.

What with all the “church-dividing issues” there are to contend with these days, we “ecumeniacs” may very well be very weary. Yet during this special week set aside for intentional and communal prayer for Christian unity, perhaps we denizens of the “God Box” can realize again our need to rely less on ourselves and more on the Lord to show us the ecumenical way forward. In spite of all the denominational disagreements and ecclesial controversies in which we ecumenists seemingly live and move and have our being, it might dawn on us anew this week that the common spiritual discipline of perseverance in prayer for the unity of Christ’s church makes all things possible, even ecumenical miracles.

Indeed, as Yves Congar discerned: “We can only pass through the door of (Christian) unity on our knees.” The annual celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a humbling reminder that the ecumenical vocation calls for the complete surrender of any sinful tendencies we might have to work harder than we pray for the unity of Christ’s Church. The Unity Octave is our annual invitation to recall that before unity is our task, it is already God’s gift. Therefore, our prayers this week should begin and end with the simple expression of profound gratitude.

So, let us pray...

May the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight...

The Graymoor Institute's resource materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity note the biblical theme this year "is rooted in the experience of the churches in Korea" and "their national division." Thus, the Korean churches "turned for inspiration to the prophet Ezekiel, who also lived in a tragically divided nation and longed for the unity of his people."

Near the end of this meditation, I will come back to the concerns I surmise prompted our sisters and brothers in Christ in Korea to select our biblical text and extrapolate from them. I will seek to show how the passage from scripture chosen by our sisters and brothers in Christ in Korea has relevance for Christians today in the United States and elsewhere in the *oikoumene*. And, I will conclude with a brief comment on two latter day Ezekiels who boldly held two sticks in hand before the public eye.

Let me begin by highlighting the three points I will try to make in this meditation. First, the prophet serves as the herald of the good news God has for the divided kingdom of Israel. Second, the separated tribes of Israel need to undergo national repentance before the good news can be fully grasped. Third, the good news is then that national unity will be restored and the covenant renewed when the people return to the Lord their God.

Let us now turn to the text from Ezekiel 37 which records the second vision contained in this chapter.

First, the prophet serves as the herald of the good news God has for the divided kingdom of Israel. Listen to Ezekiel from Chapter 37. “The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, take a stick and write on it, “For Judah, and the Israelites associated with it”; then take another stick and write on it, “For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with it”; and join them together into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand. And when your people say to you, “Will you not show us what you mean by these?” say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am about to take the stick of Joseph (which is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with it; and I will put the stick of Judah upon it, and make them one stick, in order that they may be one in my hand. When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, then say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms.” (Ezekiel 37:15-22, NRSV)

After suffering ignominious military defeat and the conquest and destruction of its capitol, experiencing the humiliation of forced exile and the separation of its peoples, backsliding into apostasy and idolatry, defiling themselves in every manner of transgression, abandoning any sense of covenantal duty and losing all hope for national purpose, Ezekiel prophesies that the divided kingdom of Israel will become united in God's hand just like the two sticks he holds as one in his own. Daniel I. Block in his commentary *The Book of Ezekiel*, noted that "the audience's attention is drawn away from the prophet to the divine agent in the events" and that "(every) phase of the restoration required direct and miraculous divine intervention." (1) In short, Ezekiel announces the good news by symbolically illustrating with the two sticks joined together in his hand what God alone can accomplish—the reunification of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel—held together at last in God's own hand.

However, and this is the second point, the separated tribes of Israel, presumably, must undergo national repentance. In the next verse from this chapter we hear these words of God spoken through the lips of the prophet: "They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen, and will cleanse them. Then

they shall be my people, and I will be their God.” (Ezekiel 37:23, NRSV)

The need for repentance is not made explicit in this particular chapter but it is implicit in the prophet’s message of God’s promise to “save them” if the peoples’ genuine intent is to truly and earnestly repent of their sins. We remember that it was the waywardness and rebelliousness of the people of Israel that led to their tragic plight of becoming a people conquered and exiled, one people defeated and separated. Their sense of “chosen-ness” had been severely chastened and their conviction of being in covenant relationship had been radically called into question. The prophets proclaimed the Israelites stood under the harsh judgment of God and that their current predicament could be construed as just punishment for the severity of their national iniquity. It was as if faced with the choice of “life” and “blessings” *or* “death” and “curses,” the people of Israel chose foolishly and fatefully. Their unholy behavior was an offense to holiness of God. “The whole history of Israel...had been one long tantrum by Israel,” Walter Brueggemann concluded, adding: “Israel never obeyed, according to Ezekiel, not even from the beginning.” (2) The hard-hearted disobedience of the people—their repeated failure to live by the commandments of the Lord their God—was their own undoing. Such a situation resulted in the end of the world as they knew it for Israelites and the land once promised to them

by the Lord their God. (3) It is hard to imagine a country more desolate, a people more bereft, or a condition more hopeless. The affliction of the people is palpable. It would not be an exaggeration to define the state of affairs in the divided kingdom as utterly godforsaken. Driven to despair, we read in between the lines in this passage of scripture, that the people of Israel finally come to the painful awareness of their need for national repentance.

But it is against this bleak historic backdrop we can consider the third point. The good news is that national unity will be restored and the covenant renewed when the people return to the Lord their God. In other words, there is still hope for the divided kingdom and separated people—the “hope...for homecoming.”(4) By returning to the Lord their God the people will be returned to the land promised them, not only restored but veritably unified, what Brueggemann tellingly described as “the *ecumenical* vision of north and south reunited.” (emphasis added) (5) In fact, it is not merely the restoration of a nation and the reunion of its people that Ezekiel envisions by the people returning to the Lord their God, but “a new creation, the birth of a new people which should be a sign of hope to other peoples and indeed to all the world.” (6) Why there is even the hope for resurrection of the skeletal remains of a people given up for dead, as Ezekiel prophesies in his first vision found in Chapter 37, the vision of “the valley of the dry bones.”

Hear how beautifully Ezekiel depicts God's promise of a post-exilic Israel. "My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore." (Ezekiel 37:24-27, NRSV)

Here we have a vision of "the peaceable kingdom" based on "a covenant of peace," "an everlasting covenant." Through Ezekiel, God speaks again of the land promised to the people of Israel and their return to it with the added assurance that God is pleased to make it God's own "dwelling place." Through Ezekiel, God speaks of the original responsibility assigned to the nation of Israel to be "a light to the nations." The Israelites will not only live in the Promised Land but be a land of

promise for all nations. “Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.” What nation would not covet such a covenant? How blessed is such assurance. A divided nation and separated people *made whole*, a root meaning of salvation. God says, “I will save them....”

I indicated I would come back to the concerns that prompted our sisters and brothers in Christ in Korea to select our biblical text. I also said I will seek to show how the passage from scripture chosen by our sisters and brothers in Christ in Korea is relevant to Christians today in the United States and the world around—the *oikoumene*. To these tasks, I now turn.

The timeliness of this year’s biblical theme cannot be understood or appreciated apart from the current condition in Korea—a country divided and a people separated—precisely the same historical circumstance that elicited Ezekiel’s prophecy in our text today. A relic of the middle of the last century superpower confrontation and stand-off, Korea remains a divided country with its peoples separated by a boundary, euphemistically called the De-Militarized Zone, drawn for them by others. Moreover, the peoples of the Korean peninsula are apparently in a permanent state of war inasmuch as only a truce has been declared, never a peace treaty signed. Now, our Korean sisters and brothers in Christ have decided that neither the

Cold War nor its vestiges are very good for warm Christian hearts, to paraphrase William Sloane Coffin. In Ezekiel 37, they found both a vision for their own homeland *and* the ecumenical community within it. It is an inspiring vision. See if you can begin to get a glimpse of the implications of this vision and its contemporary relevance, as I extrapolate from it.

Think of all the boundaries we continue draw demarcated by the victors over the vanquished, all the new walls of separation we feel we must build to combat sectarian strife, all the added barriers we erect to cope with internecine conflict. Once these boundaries are drawn, rarely are they soon erased. Once these walls are built, seldom are they promptly torn down. Once these barriers are erected, they are not quickly crossed. In the selection of the vision of the two sticks in Ezekiel 37, our Korean sisters and brothers in Christ are sharing with us their collective anguish over their nation's divided condition, reminding us of their shared hope for national reconciliation and reunion and underscoring their ecumenical determination to help write their own country's destiny.

Yet, the Christian community in Korea is doing something more and equally important. Our Korean sisters and brothers in Christ are calling us to a deeper recognition of the far-reaching significance of courageous ecumenical action to speak prophetic truth to "the principalities and

powers.” The Christian community in Korea, two different sticks, one North the other South, fervently prays to be joined together in God’s hand. The Koreans, North and South alike, eagerly yearn to become “one nation...indivisible.” But the most dangerous dimension of the current division of Korea into two countries is the fact that they each carry big sticks—nuclear weapons. The North is newest member of the nuclear club while the South has long been under the nuclear umbrella of the United States. The Christians of Korea know a *kairos* moment when they see one. As Korea is once again a ultra-sensitive international trip wire, this time for a potential global conflagration, the churches of that country are coming together to be “a light to the nations” to warn them of their “persistence” in the folly of nuclear weapons possession and proliferation. (7)

Ezekiel’s compelling vision of the two sticks can provide us perspective on our contemporary geo-political situation. Even as two nations can become one country in God’s hand, likewise the churches of all countries can be joined together in God’s hand through their ecumenical commitment to one another—across any boundaries. As Michael E. Livingston, Executive Director of The International Council of Community Churches, maintained: ““That they may be one in (God’s) hand is an earnest desire for God’s reconciling intervention in human affairs.”” It summons us,

the Christians of the United States, to an ecumenical commitment commensurate to that of our Korean counterparts. In the words penned by Methodist Bishop Herbert G. Welch which were subsequently incorporated into *The Korean Creed* of 1930, we are charged to be of “service to all who are united to the living Lord.”

The ecumenical challenge issued by the Christians of Korea must be met by the churches of this land. Could not the ecumenical community in our country advocate vigorously for a justly reunited Korea? Can we not rally to make common cause with our Korean sisters and brothers in Christ? This week, as we pray for the unity of Christians around the world, let us unite our hearts in prayer especially with the Christians of Korea who have a wonderfully alternative vision of their nation’s future. It was a generous ecumenical gift for the Korean Christian community to share with us the dreams they dream for their country.

Let me bring this meditation to a close by noting two other individuals who, in their own unique ways, held, as it were, two sticks in hand in an attempt to illuminate the divided nature of our own nation.

In a wonderful coincidence on the calendar or an amazing instance of divine providence—*you decide*—we now celebrate our national holiday honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the same time we mark the

annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I had a flashback the other day to the soaring oratory of his famous sermon delivered on April 4, 1967, a year to the day before he was assassinated, right across the street at The Riverside Church. Dr. King decried what he called “a society gone mad on war” and indicted his “own government” as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.” He urged us “to see war as the enemy of the poor” and condemned “the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism.” Dr. King declared: “A nation that continues year after year to spend more on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” Dr. King, if you will, held two sticks in his hand. He called attention to two nations—one white, the other black. He called attention to two countries—one filthy rich, the other miserably poor. He called attention to our bitterly divided nation that says ““Peace, peace,” when there is no peace” because it is both waging one war or another, sometimes two at once, and constantly preparing to wage the next war. Like the Israelites of old, Dr. King believed national repentance was an imperative for all Americans because of “all the apostasies into which they have fallen.” Two days ago, we had occasion to hearken back to the two sticks Dr. King always held in his hand.

Just yesterday, we had the historic opportunity to witness our nation inaugurate its first African-American President, Barack Obama. President Obama also has been holding two sticks in his hand, arguing eloquently for years now that there are no “red states” and no “blue states” but only the United States. In one of his most famous speeches, President Obama proclaimed “There's not a liberal America and a conservative America; there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America.” Is it not refreshing to hear such lofty ideals expressed by the one who occupies the highest public office in the land? But I digress...

Blest be Ezekiel for offering us his vision of the two sticks and bidding us to pray that *all* the nations “may be one in (God’s) hand.” Blest be the Christians of Korea for calling *all* the disciples of Christ to “be one in (God’s) hand.” Blest be *all* the prophets who dare to hold two sticks of one kind or another “in order that they may be one in (God’s) hand.” I am grateful beyond any singing of it that we worship and praise the Holy One who’s “got the whole world in (God’s) hands.”

Amen.

NOTES

- (1) Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 25-48*, pp. 405 and p. 412.
- (2) Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, p. 77.
- (3) Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, p. 4.
- (4) Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, p. 66.
- (5) Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, p. 74.
- (6) Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity *Resources for The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*, p. 3 of 24, from the Vatican website.
- (7) Cf. Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly*, p. 383.