

January 26, 2025

Mixing Metaphors & Visions

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Rev. Nick Hatch

Let us pray:

God, you recast metaphors and bless us with visions of the world our faith calls us to sustain. May all we dream be clothed in the Living word of Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our rock and our redeemer.

I woke up from a nap at the edge of a mountain river. I was alone. The coolness of the evening air has coaxed me awake. I could feel the humidity from the clear, boulder strewn river at my feet, and hear its waters gurgling and tumbling by. The half-light of the jagged mountains to my west cast a shadow across the whole valley floor. Orange light from the setting sun illuminated the mountain crest to my east. I felt a fly rod in my hand although I had no memory of how it got there. My waders had kept my torso and legs warm but my slightly sunburnt face and arms felt nights hands sliding upon them. I sat up, rolled my shirt sleeves down, and noticed a path to my right- which led downstream, I followed it.

Downstream I wandered, not really a care in my mind. Somehow, I knew it had been a good day - when I raised my right hand to nose, it smelled of trout, dry-fly dope and mountain water. I then dangled my arms at me side

to feel the seed pods of grass washing through my fingertips as I walked. It grew darker.

Then, I saw an orange light. It was a structure: a log lodge set high and overlooking the river. Its light spilled across a meadow and twinkled on the ripples on the river, and caught the grass seed heads like lighters waving in a music fest finale. And I stopped, because I just knew that in that place, they were all waiting for me. Everyone. Everyone I had ever loved and every known. Everyone I had yet to meet and everyone I missed. The camel cigarette odor of my grandfather wafted into my nostrils. The footsteps of our miscarried children beat the floor. And I froze, dumbstruck at the gravity and impossibility of being re-united. To gather in lost love, a love I knew was gracious and forgiving and merciful and complete. And they were all there- waiting to greet me, to visit, in this strange and beautiful place. I dropped the rod into the grass, and I muttered the words “Oh my God...”

And then I really woke up, I sat up in bed, overcome with feelings.

This was a dream that has stuck with me for decades. Its part metaphor, part vision. It mixes my grace filled and loving understanding of “home” with something that is yet to come and only possibly through the divine power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Metaphors can give us images, and images can become power visions for the future- some which we even dare to call prophecy.

Our scripture from Corinthians is one of Paul's most famous metaphors used to elaborate on his overarching message of unity within the Christian church. Christian churches throughout the centuries have continued to liken the baptized body of believers to an incarnate organism. And, true to his intent, this scripture is regularly preached ecumenically within the Christian faith and referenced inter-religiously among the major world faiths.

But Paul's body metaphor wasn't new, in biblical times it had enjoyed a long tradition in a variety of classical writings. Many non-Christian and non-Jewish writers used this metaphor as a way of talking about social, civic and political life. There were political theorists who spoke of the state, or the cosmos, as a single body, with the emperor as its head. Thus, all citizens were required to play their parts to keep things balanced.

Paul re-casts this metaphor after receiving his vision, infused with the new historical narrative of Jesus life, death, and resurrection. One theologian says:

*Previously, the comparison had re-enforced hierarchy suggesting that lowly workers, the drones, should obey and support their military, mercantile, and political leaders. Those at the bottom of the social ladder should stay put and be grateful for the guidance and protection of their natural superiors. – Lee C. Barrett*

Yet Paul unravels this metaphor's original intent. He emphasizes that our strength and humanity comes from our communal, divine, inseparability. He lifts up "lowly" members into places of "privilege". He encourages clothing

the “less honorable” members with greater honor and the less “respectable” members with greater respect. If one member suffers all suffer! If one member rejoices all rejoice! Through baptism we shall transform this world into a Godly organism to make manifest the incarnate Living Word of Jesus Christ.

Can you imagine what effect Paul’s words must had upon those who heard them? I wonder how the well-educated and well-connected people, for whom this metaphor both lacked originality and shelved “natural” order, would have responded?

Many Psychologists studying the power of metaphors and how they shape our human lives. One asked those around him to share with him their foundational narratives they use to make meaning. Here is a brief sample:

*Life is a battlefield.*

*Life is a river we must cross.*

*Life is a gift for us to enjoy.*

*Life is a cross to bear.*

*Life is a terror to survive.*

*Life is a legacy to forge.*

*Life is an artwork to create.*

*Life is a banquet for pigging out.*

*Life is a problem to mull over.*

*Life is a mountain that must be climbed.*

*Life a journey to follow.*

*Life is a sin to redeem.*

*Life is a cause to serve.*

- Mark Matousek

He then elaborated, in rather specific detail, his observations of how each metaphor defined their owner: coloring their worldview, determining beliefs, directing relationships, choosing political affiliations, outlining family values, and impacting their overall life-choices.

I wonder, do you have key images or metaphors that guide your thinking? Where do these images come from and are they centered in scriptural wisdom?

Paul is re-sharing a powerful metaphor, cast not by coercive power, but by the self-emptying life of Jesus Christ who chose powerless in order to save and empower us all. Paul is identifying a new and different sort of community for Christians. Our allegiance is to a new and categorically different 'Lord'. In so doing, his extended metaphor becomes something more radical and costly- his words become for us a vision, which should make us wake up, sit up, and take notice.

This vision of the baptized community pleads for our fidelity, like Christ's words from the cross

πατήρ, ἀφεῖς αὐτοῖς, οὐ γὰρ οἶδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν.}

"Pater apheres autoi ou gar oidasin ti poiousin"

"Father forgive them. For they do not know what they are doing."

One theologian reflects:

*It is not just that we have bodies, we are a body, in which the divisions are the illusion and the barriers and the disease. Of all the divisions, the most damaging is that of one part of ourself from another part of ourself. As long as we are strangers to ourselves, then we will be deeply strangers to others. Sometimes it may be our experience of being deeply loved by another that will bring us home. Life is kinder than we let it be, for there are so many occasions for love, if we don't let fear overpower us. – Kathy Galloway*

This week I watched both the inaugural address and attended an MLK celebration called *For Such a Time as This: Interfaith Service and Moral Mass Meeting*. Incidentally, I would encourage you watch the MLK event, there is a link on our website, our denomination sponsored this event.

The words and images and metaphors shared in these two different events on the same day could not be more different. It's no wonder we are stranger to ourselves, no wonder we have such trouble being the living body amidst dueling values, ideologies, and distinctly different caricatures of what the future should truly look like.

But when Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde spoke in our National Cathedral, I sat up and listened:

*"In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican, and independent families, some who fear for their lives. The people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings; who labor in poultry farms and meat packing plants; who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shifts in hospitals, they – they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation. But the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes and are good neighbors. I ask you to have mercy, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. And that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were all once strangers in this land."*

Bishop Budde placed before the nation an absolutely rock-solid scriptural vision - a vision of lowly people needing to be clothed with greater honor and respect. It isn't a convenient vision. Divine visions aligned with the loving judgement of our jealous, immutable, and omniscient God are never convenient. Ask Isaiah Ezekiel or Joel, ask Mary and Joseph, ask Abraham, heck ask Paul who landed in prison. Divine metaphors recontextualize our individual life into the fullness of the body of Jesus Christ, with all its diversity, muckiness, beauty and sinful nature. Divine visions are not stabilizing for a capitalistic social hierarchy. Yet, Bishop Budde's words are in concert with both scripture and this jerky guy named Paul who hijacked the states words to claim that we are all made to drink of the one Spirit.

We all mix metaphors and visions of the future, but whose metaphors do you embody? Do they nourish the living body of Jesus Christ?

Friends, you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church all manner of gifts. Strive for the greater gifts. Strive to honor your baptismal covenant, your identity as a child of God. Strive, and God promises to show us still a more excellent way. For life is kinder than we often let it be, and there are many occasions to invite love to overpower us.

May our metaphors yield a profound unity and abundant life. May our visions be divinely inspired making us sit up and just know, a deep knowing in the marrow of our bones, that love will be fulfilled. May we live the words of the Gospel, gathering us in lost love, a love we know to be gracious and forgiving and merciful and complete.

Amen.