

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
Pentecost 16, September 12, 2021
Proper 19

“Called to be a Movement”

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-8;
James 3:1-12, [11-13], 14-17; Mark 8:27-38

“Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.” So began a most bizarre adventure for a little girl and her dog in the aftermath of a fearsome tornado. An adventure that would charm both adults and children for generations.

That might be fine for a film narrative, but it’s all too real and all too devastating for many abandoned Americans as the summer comes to a close. We’re not in the usual, comfortable America anymore.

The sleepy little town of Fair Bluff sits on the banks of the Lumber River in North Carolina. Like many small rural towns, it is facing its demise. Battered by Hurricane Matthew in 2016, and then again by Hurricane Florence in 2018, there’s little left to wash away. The threat had

become existential when their main industry, a factory producing vinyl products, had shut its doors and left after Matthew tore through.

Towns like Fair Bluff throughout the South and Northeast lie in sodden devastation. Many residents have either died, or if fortunate, relocated.

“On a recent afternoon, the sidewalks were empty and the storefronts abandoned, their interiors smashed up and littered with trash, doors ajar. The roof of one building had collapsed, a battered American flag stuck in the debris; inside other buildings were ransacked shelves, plastic containers full of Christmas decorations, an upside-down tricycle. Speakers on a Methodist church played recorded hymns for no one.”¹

Further south, New Orleans seemed on the verge of a comeback in the waning days of August. And then Hurricane Ida hit -- the coup de grace to this year’s tourist season. Hotels had been completely booked. Bartenders and restaurateurs were looking for a big Labor Day weekend that might help them catch up. Lots of tips. Now one manager had to let their guests know that storm damage had closed the hotel. Much of the “Big Easy” swelters in unbearable heat, no electric power to be had for a couple more weeks. No water either.

In California much of the state appears as an apocalyptic inferno straight out of hell. In spite of super-human efforts, the Caldor Fire creeps ever steadily towards the resort community of Lake Tahoe -- erratic winds driving the blaze from treetop to treetop. The tourist season is up in smoke.

What an end to a summer. All the while, the delta valiant rages and fills emergency rooms and ICUs to overflowing. Our schools are opening. But will they stay open? We now have a pandemic of the unvaccinated!

The caldron of suffering and death is nothing new to the Christian community. Remember those who hid Jews from Hitler. As Jesus and his disciples traveled from town to town, he did not sugarcoat their immediate prospects. He labored under no illusions.

¹ Christopher Flavelle, “Battered Bottom Line in Towns Climate Change Has Come For”, *New York Times*, September 4, 2021.

“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed...If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

This is not a journey for the fainthearted or the sunshine disciple. Not for the lackadaisical or those seeking certainty or the self-congratulatory seeking redemption in worn-out dogma. The fires rage, the winds howl, making it real. No escape for the pious. Jesus warned his followers that the only path of faithful discipleship was through the toils and the sufferings of humanity. With some joy and respite along the way. That joy we would discover in one another's company as we pass through it all.

That is why we are called by our presiding bishop Michael Curry to turn the Jesus club into the Jesus Movement. Jesus does not need admirers and disputatious folks who argue over who he is.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Get that cross off your lapel, from around your neck and onto your back. Jesus is calling people who will do what he does – heal the sick, feed the hungry and visit those in prison, hold a hand of the troubled. That is also the call of Bishop William Barber, leader of Moral Mondays—his summons to today's communities of faith -- to be a MOVEMENT.²

We, indeed, are called to be a MOVEMENT of joy and hope in the midst of our battered nation.

No one may be attending to the hymns broadcast from the United Methodist church in Fair Bluff, but there yet remains a community of the faithful who pays the electric bill. These are the ones who will do welfare checks on their neighbors. These will show up with a covered dish for those whose home has been devastated. These people will watch your children while you stand in line to complete forms for rebuilding at the emergency shelter. These are Spirit-empowered folks in it for the long haul. In it for the journey to Jerusalem and beyond.

² William J. Barber, II, *We are Called to Be a Movement* (New York: Workman Publishing Co., Inc., 2020).

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

As one chef grilling hamburgers in downtown New Orleans for hurricane survivors said when asked by a reporter, “This is what we do here for one another.” This is what we do. Sounds like the beginnings of a movement to me.

Bishop Barber identifies the “ghetto of Nazareth” as the origin of this movement. A movement led by those made poor by systems of exploitation – that is the context of “ptokos”³ – the impoverished.

Out of this backwater, this impoverished village, this place not unlike Fair Bluff, or any of the myriad abandoned communities scattered across America comes a stirring.

“In Caesar’s world, where narcissistic leaders only cared about the grand and the greedy, the pompous and the pretentious, Jesus announces a revival led by and among the rejected. Caesar, who loved to put his face on money and buildings; Caesar, who catered to the greedy and led by fear and political shenanigans.”⁴

The Jesus mission is a clarion call to the broken and the lost, to those who will never receive an invite to Mar-a-Lago or much of anywhere else. To those in disbelief, staring at their sodden belongings in a flooded home, comes a summons.

Into that world of stratospheric wealth and power, Jesus inaugurates a movement out of literally, “nowhere.” And through “nobodies.” A Movement of the unlettered, the disenfranchised, both men and women, the lowly – in sum, the poor.

On this weekend anniversary of 9/11, most of us remember exactly where we were when those planes hit the towers.

I remember Jonathan calling from school, asking if I had the TV on. “Go turn it on, Dad. Planes just crashed into the World Trade Tower in New

³ Op Cit, 11.

⁴ Op. cit., 11-12.

York. This is bad. I don't think we can't let this one slide. Gotta get to class," and with that, he was gone.

Mesmerized, I stared disbelieving at the screen -- transfixed by the enormity of the tragedy. One of the first thoughts that entered my mind after I started processing this reality was: "Can't let this one slide? Now, I suspect we are going to do something very stupid."

Looking back at our exit from Afghanistan last week, that's exactly what we did. Not one, but two very stupid decisions. That's the assessment of two significant foreign policy scholars, both with combat experience: Paul Rieckhoff, founder of Iraq Afghanistan Veterans of America. Also Col. Andrew Bacevich (ret.), who served in the Vietnam War. Both, published authors and professors. Andrew lost a son in the Iraq war. Read their writings. "Chasing Ghosts"⁵ and "After the Apocalypse."⁶

Twenty years later, we still remember those first responders clambering over "the pile" desperately searching for any survivors. The pictures of fire fighters, covered with ash and dust, sleeping on the pews of St. Paul's chapel down the street. Exhausted beyond endurance. The names posted on pictures and notes tied to the fence of that house of worship inquiring as to the whereabouts of family members and friends. Lit at night by a sea of votive candles. And hovering about it all, unseen, the prayers of a nation.

Looking back on the tragedy of 9/11, the Covid scourge tearing at our nation – the multitude of problems we face – we need a grounded community of Hope. We need a Spirit Movement.

As I watched, probably the most compelling narrative of the events of 9/11 and twenty years forward, I was most grateful to the two film makers who put together "Memory Box: Echoes of 9/11." Record it, stream it. It's available in multiple showings on MSNBC. And get a box of Kleenex. The gift of this film is of the same kind as that of the Jesus Movement. Chock-a-block Spirit-filled compassion. And HOPE.

⁵ Paul Rieckhoff, *Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq: A Soldier's Perspective* (New York: New American Library – Caliber, 2006).

⁶ Andrew Bacevich, *After the Apocalypse: America's Role in a World Transformed* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021).

The Church at it's best nurtures that Spirit. Is a habitation for that Spirit. But that same Spirit moves through and among those daily building the Beloved Community. Some Christian, some Jewish and Muslim. Some "Nones" whose faith alone is known to God.

On this anniversary of 9/11, surrounded yet by a sea of pandemic, we are not a people without Hope.

I share a story from my friend Dick Bunce – shamelessly stolen from the sermon he preached to the Unitarians this last week.

From Dick I quote:

"Here's a brief clip from a recent issue of a news magazine. A Michigan judge, Bruce Morrow, gave Edward Martell, a drug dealer, probation instead of a prison sentence of many years. This changed Martell's life.

Judge Morrow said: *Mr. Martell, I believe you have greatness within you. I sentence you to probation and challenge you to become the CEO of a fortune 500 company.*

Martell worked his way up, first enrolling in a community college, then graduating from undergraduate and then from law school. All the while, Judge Morrow stayed in contact with Martell, and Martell with the judge.

Martell had many obstacles to overcome. Recently, now 43, he stood before the judge again, this time to be sworn in for the practice of law.

Martell says he cried like a baby. I doubt that the judge had dry eyes as well.

Wow. What if this could become widespread? What if a whole city could become known as a city of compassion? "

A nation of Compassion. A nation of Justice. A nation of Peace. A nation of Generosity. A nation of Equity and Opportunity. That is the movement Rev. Barber is summoning us to. Jesus summons us to.

This coming week, we lay to rest the mortal remains of a sister who over the years has been a faithful member of St. Francis, Sally Mayock Hartley. With these words we in thanksgiving return her to her maker:

"Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant Sally Mayock Hartley. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your

own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive her into the arms of your mercy, and the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints of light.”

Might we also live into the reality of this prayer. At the end of this mortal journey might we be accounted a member of that Blessed Community. “Servant, well done.” Until then, may we daily strive to be staunch and steadfast members of the Jesus Movement. Amen.