Hearing the apostle Paul’s words in a hospital stroke unit

Struck down but not destroyed, perplexed but not forsaken

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“Like a bolt out of the blue,” the neurologist said to me, stricken as I lay in the intensive care unit. “That’s why we call it a stroke.” Suddenly “struck down”—in this respect similar to what befell Paul on the road to Damascus, unanticipated and without forewarning. In those trying moments, how often this Paul appropriated that one! I held onto especially a snippet of my ordination sermon text from many years before, though I was fully aware of the gap between Paul’s sense of persecution from without and mine of injury from within: “struck down but not destroyed.”

I was at a theological conference when it happened, descending a staircase. Construction was going on outside, with a huge concrete pumping machine at work; I turned back to look at this technological marvel through the glass walls and collapsed on the staircase. Dazed, I was helped to my feet. I thought I had missed

my step, fallen, and struck my jaw on the handrail. I stammered that I thought I'd gotten a concussion. Unbelievably in hindsight, I walked all the way down the staircase until those around me forced me to sit down; through the fog I saw that they were concerned at my appearance.

As the ambulance sped me to the hospital, the medic attending me said, "I hate to tell you this, buddy, but I think you're having a stroke."

I experienced cognitive dissonance—again, like Paul on the road to Damascus. What could it mean that the crucified blasphemer whose spreading cult he was determined to arrest now appeared to him in glory identifying, as if in his own body, with those whom he was persecuting? Three weeks before I had been in the Canadian Rockies, hiking five steep uphill miles to view spectacular waterfalls. What on earth had just happened to me?

If I had to have a stroke, it couldn't have happened at a better time and place or with better company. Special care was given to my distraught loved ones. "Perplexed, but not forsaken"—another echo of Paul (2 Corinthians 4) came to me. I was not forsaken.

But I was perplexed. What's the good of humanity? That was the question of our theological conference; an existential version of it pressed hard upon my muddled mind in those first 48 hours when I was on surgical watch, awakened regularly and interrogated to the point of exasperation as they monitored the function of my damaged brain. What good am I—now?

Whether due to the tranquility of faith or to a streak of recklessness in my character, I had no fear of death during this ordeal. My thoughts went instead to the suffering my untimely death would cause my loved ones, especially my adult son. For his sake, I could not now die. So my prayer in the ambulance—as I, to use a colorful expression of Martin Luther's, earnestly "rubbed God's ears in his promises"—was that the Lord would spare my little life because my death at this juncture would be just too cruel for my son.

My week at the hospital also gave me a study in contrasts between the excellent medical care that I received, as a well-insured person, and the striking class, gender, and race divisions visible both in the ranks of those who served me and in those treated alongside of me. Is the good of my individual life little more than my privileged capacity to pay for it? Why shouldn't this excellent care be available to

any and all?

A previous church generation called Jesus our Great Physician, healer of soul and body. The present generation has learned with some success that ministry in Jesus's name cannot truthfully lay claim to the soul while leaving the body to the devil. The ministry of the reign of God which Jesus inaugurates when he comes into Galilee is a work of healing: faith and forgiveness for the guilty and despairing soul, but also sight for the blind, mental freedom from the tyranny of unclean spirits, food for the hungry. The apocalyptic framework of the gospel shows that these works of healing by Jesus were at once assaults on the devil's tyranny and foretastes of the promised resurrection.

Aye, there's the rub. Healing, however real, is temporary; only the resurrection is everlasting. Pastors who engage ministries of healing with their communities of faith wrestle daily with this evanescence of healing. Healed, finished, mission accomplished, time to move on—wouldn't that be great? But the faithful minister of the gospel knows better: as we are to be satisfied with daily bread, so must we also be satisfied with daily healing. The minister is the one who keeps on keeping on, daily pulling body and soul from the pits into which they have fallen, knowing full well that tomorrow they may fall again. Here successes are temporary because they can only be real as foretastes of something yet to come. That's why the pastoral faith behind a ministry of healing is often on trial: until the kingdom comes in power and glory it is deprived of a final resolution.

Pauline perplexity at being struck down but not destroyed thus remains the marching order of the church's ministry. For the Christian this life is becoming, not being; labor, not rest; healing, not wholeness. In the great eighth chapter of Romans Paul insists that we and all creation need yet await in eager longing "the redemption of our bodies."

But there's also a gift of clarity in the midst of this perplexity, if only we can faithfully abide in it. What humanity has in common is not a state of consciousness but a state of bodilyness. This bodilyness is foundational: it connects human beings to one another and to the good earth and only so also to God our common creator and redeemer and fulfiller. The ontology of beloved community is thus existentially to be discovered in the bodily reality of creation. This has to be discovered, however, because the bodily reality of creation is distorted and obscured from sight by our uniquely human apostasy, which is the bone-deep despair of unbelief.

Freed from sorrow, freed from sin, creation's hope for the victory of beloved community emerges afresh for perception and participation as the earthly body of the risen Lord comes on the scene and appears in the midst of our brokenness. Just as the risen Lord identified his own body with those whom Paul persecuted, so Paul later realized that the body is no arbitrary metaphor. The risen Lord really has an earthly body composed of his called people, an ecclesia.

As a body on the earth, the ecclesia can be wounded from without but also injured from within. So the ministry of healing applies not only to the church's ministry to the world but also—urgently—to the wounded church itself. We must intentionally be *pro ecclesia*. A fractured body of Christ cannot provide healing in the world as it wants when it is itself in need of healing.

So I've seen this time of trial in my little life as a microcosm of the state of the church today: struck down but not destroyed, perplexed but not forsaken. Whether we say with Thomas Aquinas that doing follows from being or with Martin Luther that the work follows from the person, in either case we are pointed thereby to the maimed body of Christ which we have in common, in need of healing from within so that in the pastoral ministries of our communities of faith, we are about the healing of hurting bodies and sorrowing souls surrounding us.