

Philip Blackwell

Crazy Hope

Where are there signs of hope today? Certainly, they are not found in the headlines about the nation, the world, or even the church! That is true, unfortunately, but here are some places that I have found reason to hope. At first glance these people may look “crazy,” but remember that the same thing was said about Jesus.

Crazy Mary, the resister. She returns from the Parliament of the World’s Religions this summer with a new-found vigor to make a difference in the world. So, she makes her first trek to Fort Benning, Georgia, to join the annual protest against the School of the Americas. Our government calls the SOA something else today, changing the name to protect the guilty, but it remains the training ground for repressive military and paramilitary forces in Central and South America.

Mary marches, learns, thinks, and returns with insight on “how it is that all of us benefit from the disenfranchisement of others, even those of us who protest against it. We prosper because others are exploited.” What a realization! It is a step along the path of change that most of us, I fear, do not want to take. “She’s a little ‘off,’ you know, filled with crazy ideas.” Ah, crazy Mary. Where there is insight there is hope.

Crazy Lucy, the nurse. She works with pregnant teenagers in the city. “Children having children,” we are prone to say. She helps them have a healthy pregnancy, a safe birth, and then an understanding of how not to have another baby until they are ready. Lucy spends her life trying to break the life-deadening cycle by loving these young girls.

This may be the most love these teenage mothers have ever received. Lucy loves them, she says, because Christ first loved us. It’s crazy, she knows. Our society has decided that these young girls are expendable and so are their babies. But Lucy knows that every time she cradles an infant it is Christ in our midst, and she portrays the crazy message that we must love one another. Where there is love there is hope.

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Crazy Elias, the educator. He lives in Israel, in Galilee, and he has this crazy idea that Jews, Muslims, and Christians can live together. Even with all of their differences, even with all the political pressure to stay segregated, he brings them together in the school he established decades ago. The young ones in kindergarten up through the older ones in twelfth grade, they learn side by side. Elias himself is a Christian, yet he sees the union of all humanity with a God-like eye.

I have been invited to go soon to see Elias and his crazy dream. Some people say that it would be crazy for me to go. "It's so dangerous there now, you know." Perhaps, but how much longer are we, people of good faith of all faith traditions, going to let the craziness in the Middle East go on? How much longer is God going to tolerate our making a mess of things? It is crazy that Elias is the one who looks suspicious. Where there is vision there is hope.

Crazy Congregationalists, the bearers of our pilgrim heritage of religious freedom who dare to invite everyone to church. The United Church of Christ, the main denomination within this tradition, sent a public service announcement to the television networks showing two bouncers standing on church steps letting some people through but telling other "undesirables" to go away. These included people of racial and ethnic minorities and a gay couple. The tag line was, "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we." It is the very same invitation we United Methodists extend when we proclaim our "open hearts, open minds, open doors." It gives voice to the Lord's invitation for all who labor and are heavy-laden to come to him and find rest.

Well, some of the major networks would not touch it. "It's too controversial," they said. One television official confessed that they were too afraid of our own government to run the spot announcement, given the expected push soon for a constitutionally-restricted definition of "marriage." The fact that the UCC message included no stand on the issue did not matter.

Fear can turn us into cowards. But all of us who are crazy enough to believe the UCC, the UMC, and all the others who throw open their doors and welcome everyone in are, in fact, living out God's unconditional grace, cannot allow ourselves to be intimidated. Where there is the courage of Christian conviction, there is hope.

Crazy lovers of the indigent. Bob, Barb, Marlene, Mark, Dave, Darius, these are the folks who feed the hungry every Tuesday noon in our church basement. It is cold outside, and when the temperature dips the attendance spikes. We can accommodate about 100 at tables; we can provide only sack lunches for the rest.

It's crazy, in a way. What difference does it make when there are 15,000 people out there in the city who need immediate help? We cannot meet the physical, financial, or mental health needs of even the small percentage who come to us. But it does make a difference, they tell us. Having a home-cooked meal, being treated as human beings, being reminded of the Savior who has nowhere to lay his head, and warming up before heading back to the streets – it makes a big difference. It looks crazy, what those Tuesday folks do, but it is faithful. Where there is compassion, there is hope.

Crazy Quakers, the peaceable ones. Their witness for peace has meant trouble for them ever since William Penn founded Pennsylvania in 1682 as a safe haven for his flock. Every time the members of the Society of Friends cry, "Peace! Peace!" during a time of war, they get investigated, infiltrated.

Their subversive message? They have this bizarre vision of a wolf and lamb living together, a leopard lying down with a kid, a calf and a lion and a fatling together. And they see this little child leading the way. The craziness of the Quakers is that they take the scripture seriously enough to insist on peacemaking. There is blessedness in it, someone once said. Where there is a prophetic voice there is hope.

Mary. Lucy. Elias. The UCC. The Tuesday crew. The Quakers. Crazy, all of them, some will say. Controversial, unrealistic, unreasonable, even subversive, others will add. I simply say, hopeful. □



Philip Blackwell is Senior Pastor of the Chicago Temple in Chicago, Illinois.

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