

Blessed: A Witness to Hope

Matthew 5:1-11

For the Memorial Service of Rev. Dr Emilio Castro

By Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit

To the family of our brother, Emilio Castro

To former colleagues and friends of Emilio

To those who are a part of the community here and abroad which he loved and to which he gave his pastoral service to the glory of the Risen Christ

Brothers and Sisters who move, live, and have your being in the God of Life

We gather to remember and celebrate the life and ministry of Emilio. We remember and celebrate in hope. We even mourn our loss today in hope because hope was what Emilio preached. It was in hope that he provided faithful service and leadership to the Methodist Church, the one Church as it is manifested in Latin America, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, the World Council of Churches, and the wider ecumenical movement. Emilio moved, led, lived and had his being through the lens of hope. He was, most of all, a preacher of hope.

Jesus does not merely wish that there might be something better coming for his followers. Jesus is proclaiming and declaring that they are blessed. The Word of God creates another reality. There is something more than we can see; Jesus is the reality of hope. Hope is to see what is not seen. The Beatitudes acknowledge the pains, challenges, and harsh realities of day-to-day life. He is speaking to a marginalized community of people who believe in and seek to live according to God's will and kingdom. To this unlikely group, Jesus declares, "Blessed are you..." Blessed are you, the poor in spirit. Blessed are you, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Blessed are you, those who mourn, who hunger, who are persecuted and are reviled. How can Jesus declare these suffering and persecuted followers as blessed in the context of oppression and under the shadow of death? It is not a declaration rooted in denial, for surely he is Immanuel, "God with us"; and therefore he knows intimately their pain and predicament. This declaration of blessedness is deeply grounded in the present, the present seen from the perspective of the hope that can change our reality here and now. You mourners, you hungry, you persecuted ones, you are blessed, at this present moment in the midst of your everyday experiences of life and death because of the transforming words of Jesus Christ.

When speaking of mission and evangelism, Emilio said in a similar spirit of present hope:

The mission of the church will also consist of proclaiming the present in the midst of history. Evangelism will point out the relation between our human situations and the history of God in Jesus of Nazareth; it will show how the highest human aspirations have their logical roots and their greatest promise of fulfilment in the action that took place once and for all in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. We must discover the possibility of proclaiming the name of Jesus Christ in the heart of every culture. To tell his story,

relating it to the values and particular histories of each people. The preaching of the Gospel will be possible in the measure in which we are in vital contact with our own culture, our own people. Only from this fundamental human solidarity can we point toward the source of this solidarity, toward the goal of all human history in the person of Jesus Christ.

In the proclamation of who is blessed, here and now, we find the proclamation of what “will be.” What we are now is transformed by what we will be.

The kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God is present yet still-to-come. The mourners are blessed because they will be comforted. By that word, they are already comforted. The peacemakers are blessed now because they will be called the children of God. By that word, the peacemakers know already that they are doing the holy work of God. The meek are blessed, knowing that they are not weak, but inheriting the earth. By that word, they see the power of humility already now. These are blessings and assurances to a community which consists of some who are meek, some who are persecuted, some who are mournful, and pilgrims seeking justice and peace, asking to be led by the God of Life. They are living with their realities and with their dreams. Living without dreams is dangerous because we then trust only ourselves and what we are here and now, giving into the powers of sin and death. The prophetic declarations of the Gospel are transforming words of hope, liberating ourselves from ourselves.

In light of such a hope, Castro says of our calling, “We are not called to concern ourselves about our small individual world. The Gospel is not the solution to our headaches, rather the calling for a transformation of all things in Christ. It is the invitation to enter into the ‘kingdom,’ that is, in the liberating movement of God, in the establishment of new relations of a common life for all humanity. The Kingdom of God embraces in its reality all of the aspects of our life, including all of our small individual lives as well as our small community lives.”

So we as the community of faith are called to bear witness to the present realities while simultaneously seeing the future that already exists and is to come as part of the realm of God. Our faith must orient us to a position of hope. This orientation and perspective are not myopic, only seeing limitations, nor are they naïve or trapped in denial. This hope allows for a perception and a deep-seated faith that is cast far beyond the horizon, not limited by temporal boundaries or physical space. We as the blessed ones must bear witness to those who cannot yet perceive this kind of hope. In the midst of struggles and when the pilgrimage seems to lead in circles rather than straight forward to desired outcomes, we are called to bear witness to this hope, even to one another.

I recall encountering Emilio just after I was elected to this position as general secretary. Fully remembering the challenges that he himself faced when he held the position and fully aware of many of the challenges that I would have to face, his words to me were, “I am hopeful, the best of the ecumenical movement is still to come.” Fully aware of the geopolitical, cultural, and religious strife and divisions, economic injustices, ecological degradation, profound human suffering, and the divisions that remain even in the church, there was still a glimmer in his eye and a joyful smile when he spoke those words, “I am hopeful.” His words are transforming all of us as we remember him today.

As he faced far fewer days ahead than were behind him, in his words and demeanour I heard and saw a glimpse of an eschatological hope that wedded the present with the yet to come. When we come to the end of this service, we will sing a chorus from Argentina, very close to Emilio's motherland and to his heart:

So we today have hope and expectation, so we today can struggle with conviction,

So we today can trust we have a future, so we have hope in this our world of tears,

So we today have hope and expectation, so we today can struggle with conviction,

So we today can trust we have a future, so we have hope.

I am sure that he, as a Methodist, would be pleased that we sang our theology - a theology of hope. Emilio's witness to me that day was consistent with his long vocation of proclaiming the Gospel, saying to the community of faith and to those who seek peace and justice, "Blessed are you, for your reward is great in heaven."

Today we say to our brother Emilio, "Blessed are you, now and forever!"