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The Grace of Disillusionment

The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with [them] a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves.¹

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

We rarely live up to our ideals, and when we do, the moments are brief. Solidarity is brittle. Peace is fragile. Equality is ephemeral. Still, the hard truth of just how delicate our glimpse of the Kingdom *really* is rarely stops us from hoping a new Christian community can be a more permanent witness. I have been disillusioned several times. With Christian leaders. With friends. With sisters and brothers in congregations. With Facebook groups that gather like-minded believers. With associations in which I could meet elders that paved my way and promised to make space for my contributions. These places and peoples are never quite all that I hoped and dreamed.

The disillusionment, however, is not only with others in my community; I have also been disillusioned with myself. During a consultation at which I was supposed to be a lead educator, I failed to translate my lofty ideas in a way that helped a network of pastors. They respectfully moved on from my guidance, and I was left to wrestle with my mistakes. When this happened a second and third time, I was nearly crushed by the self-doubt that followed. Disillusionment is both swift and heavy. Like g-forces bearing down on an astronaut, disillusionment can somehow leave us breathless *and* floor us. The force of it can cause the best of us to “crash out.”

Yet disillusionment, Bonhoeffer tells us, is an act of God's grace, and it is most necessary for “serious Christians,” or what Bonhoeffer later calls “dreamers.”

Those of us coming of age as theological educators are serious about our Christian vocation. We have earnest dreams for what we hope to accomplish and high expectations of the communities we join in the work. It is precisely because of our aspirations and utopic impulses that learning to receive the grace of disillusionment is critical to our maturation.

Without disillusionment, we foster “dreams” of a life in God that only reinforces the very realities we hope to change.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*.

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Jonah had to learn that the justice of God also meant mercy for repentant imperialists. Justice, Jonah learned, is greater than revenge.

Elijah was convinced that the theatrics at Mt. Carmel would cause Israel to reject false idols. When Israel did not repent as he imagined, Elijah believed the lie that only he was faithful to the Lord, yet the voice in the breeze spoke to his disillusionment, reminding him that seven thousand unnamed Israelites were faithful.

Gathered with the resurrected Jesus, the disciples asked, “Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Jesus met their narrow hope for the nation with a greater vision. Their disillusionment is our gain. The Spirit came and now we can belong to the people of God.

Even the most beautiful examples of peace, communion, and fellowship can unravel quickly. That does not make them any less real. Those glimpses of life in the Spirit are a gift. As is the disillusionment that reminds us we are not yet in the Kingdom and our dreams fall short of its glory.

– Emanuel (Ricky) Padilla, PhD
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