The Other Side of the Tracks

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The idiom “the other side of the tracks” usually refers to a line of demarcation and separation, often actually railroad tracks, between the more affluent part of a town from a more impoverished area. The separation is often both economic and racial/ethnic. Depending on which side you are on, you either have an acute awareness of the other side—its influence and control on your life—or you have some vague stereotypical ideas of a place you rarely go.

Palestinians know and understand the idiom well, simply by changing one word, “tracks” to “wall,” referring to the separation barrier/wall that Israel began to build in 2002. The separation is also psychological between Israelis and Palestinians. Between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the barrier is a 30-foot high concrete wall.

The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor and Bethlehem-born Palestinian Christian theologian, writes that “At the center of Jesus’ attention were … those who were marginalized, those who were possessed by demons, people who were not in control of their lives, people who had to fear for their lives, people who could not walk upright because they were under so much pressure and oppression.” Jesus ministered among them because he “believed that liberation started with empowering those who were marginalized.”

Writing from “the other side of the wall” [also the title of his new book], the Rev. Munther Isaac, a Palestinian Christian and pastor of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, wants to “amplify the voice of my people and my church… communities who are dehumanized, discriminated against, and rejected by the actions, attitudes, and theology of the dominant and powerful.”

This July, Palestinian Christians issued a global appeal called “Cry for Hope: A Decisive Call for Action.” The “Cry for Hope” articulates an authentic Palestinian Christian perspective on the situation of marginalization and occupation under which they live and calls on the global church and community to take specific actions to end their oppression. It states, “We continue to hold firm to the
hope[...] that Palestinians and Israelis have a common future—that we can organize our political life, with all its complexity, according to the logic of love and its power after ending the occupation and establishing justice.” And the Cry concludes by connecting the Palestinian struggle with others, “We acknowledge that by our commitment as Christians to the liberation of the Palestinian people we stand against the theology of Empire, a global order of domination manifesting in racial, economic, cultural, and ecological oppression that threatens humanity and all of creation.”

Whether talking and engaging with those on the other side of the tracks or wall, encounter involves risk, but also the possibility of real benefit. To afford oneself the opportunity to transcend stereotypes by engaging with people, to listen attentively to the authentic perspectives and realities of neighbors – both local and global – and to take those perspectives to heart in how we act is essential if we wish to see real change in the communities and world in which we live and that we share.

Then as now, more than two millennia after the birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ, the lives and stories of the marginalized deserve attention. Jesus committed his attention and ministry to them, and so must the Church be mindful and attentive to voices not always heard, remembering how Jesus elevated the downtrodden. In the words of Rev. Raheb, the Church must be inspired to live an “imaginative faith [that] rises to discover endless possibilities,” and maintain a hope that is “living the reality and yet investing in a different one.” May it be so.

References:

*Faith in the Face of Empire*, by the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, Orbis, 2014.
“Cry for Hope: A Call to Decisive Action”

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