



“...and nothing but the truth”

“**W**hat would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? / The world would split open.”

So wrote Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980) in her poem “Käthe Kollwitz,” reiterating her lifelong insistence on the importance of language—on the power of truth, spoken and lived.¹ The same passion shines through her “Ballad of Orange and Grape,” in which she makes the astonishing connection between the breakdown of society seen in the garbage, boarded windows, rape, and murder of a street in East Harlem and a “hot-dog-man” who nonchalantly overlooks the clear labels on his drink machines and “keeps pouring grape into ORANGE / and orange into the one marked GRAPE, / pouring orange into GRAPE and grape into ORANGE forever.” The “forever” ups the ante regarding the man’s (and our?) stubborn or lazy refusal to call things what they are. Given such arrogance or indifference, ponders Rukeyser,

...How can we go on reading
and make sense out of what we read?—
How can they write and believe what they’re writing,
the young ones across the street,
while you go on pouring grape into ORANGE
and orange into the one marked GRAPE—?
(How are we going to believe what we read and we write
and we hear and we say and we do?)²

Truth matters, insists Rukeyser, and language matters. The alternative is chaos. Lutherans especially should resonate with her claim, given Luther’s observation that “a theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.”³ Call good good, evil evil, and grape grape! It matters.

Which brings us to this issue’s concern with mission in the congregation. When did “mission” become our all-consuming motto, given the fact, for example, that the word itself occurs only five times in the NRSV (never in the KJV)—and only one of those has anything directly to do with the proclamation of the gospel (Acts 12:25)? Worse, two of the five describe a “mission” to kill pretty much everybody in sight in God’s name (1 Sam 15:18, 20). This is the kind of “mission” and “mis-

¹Muriel Rukeyser, “Käthe Kollwitz,” in *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Janet E. Kaufman and Anne F. Herzog, with Jan Heller Levi (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005) 463.

²Rukeyser, “Ballad of Orange and Grape,” in *ibid.*, 492–493.

³Martin Luther, “Thesis 21” of the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 53.

sionary” fervor that causes many to wonder about whether or not Christians make decent neighbors. “Mission” and “missile” have the same Latin root, alas.

Though it is that Latin root that might help us: “missio” (a sending), from “mitto” to send or despatch. And, biblically, first and foremost, sending is God’s business. The “mission” is God’s. “Whom shall I send?” wonders God; and Isaiah replies, “Here am I; send me!” (Isa 6:8). In John, too, God is the loving sender: “God did not send [ἀποστέλλω] the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). Later, the sent becomes the sender: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent [ἀποστέλλω] me, so I send [πέμπω] you’” (John 20:21). *Apostellō*—the apostolic mission: the sending of God propels the sending of us to be about the things of God, which, according to John’s Gospel include, first and foremost, forgiving sins (John 20:23) and laying down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13). Now *that* would make a good neighbor.

In other words, “mission,” biblically, is about telling the truth of the cross and doing the work of the cross—which one might not quickly discover by examining random “mission statements” of Christian congregations (try it, using Google). They tend to be much warmer, fuzzier, and considerably more optimistic than the mission described in Isaiah or John. There is a lot about growth, welcome, joy, and openness—often, to be sure, a concern for “service”—but almost never any mention of forgiving or suffering or dying. This derives, no doubt, from the provenance of mission statements, which come, of course, not from the Bible or Christian faith but from the corporate world, where, by definition, they seek always to emphasize the positive in the service of public relations for the promotion of the organization. Many of the congregational mission statements you will find sound pretty good, but they almost all sound “pretty.” Is this a problem?

Now we have come full circle. Do optimistic mission statements tell the truth about Christian mission? Or do they call grape ORANGE? An important question, because our only purpose, according to John, is to bear witness to the Truth—and we cannot do that without telling the truth. Interestingly, in the NRSV “truth” appears twenty-six times in John, only once in Matthew, twice in Mark, and three times in Luke. John is making a particular point here, one that Luther would endorse and Muriel Rukeyser would appreciate: tell the truth; call things what they are; it matters. In a world of sound bites, photo ops, and commercialized promises, telling (and doing) the truth is all we have going for us. The church has to be the place where people hear the unvarnished, un-neoned truth. Is that not, in a nutshell, our mission?

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