

Sermon Series: A Summons to Faith, Hope, and Love

II. “Hope Has Two Daughters”

Text: Romans 8:18-25

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“And now abideth hope...” I Corinthians 13:13

According to Paul, faith, hope and love are the enduring marks of the Christian life in this or in any age. They are the indispensable ingredients for holding a human life together, holding a family together, holding communities together.

Sunday before last, we focused on the spiritual gift of faith. Next Sunday, we will turn to love, the only one of the three primary spiritual gifts that will not be rendered obsolete at the end of time. There will be no need for hope, because our hopes will be fulfilled. There will be no need for faith in God, because we will live eternally in the presence of God, and the love of God will have become, as Paul puts it elsewhere, “all in all.” (I Corinthians 15: 28) Love will endure eternally. Paul, the author of both Romans and Corinthians, believed that he and the other followers of the risen Christ who were alive during Paul’s lifetime were living in a brief interim period between the time of the resurrection of Jesus and the parousia, or the Second Coming of Christ. In that in-between time, after Christ’s victory over death, and before the final culmination of human history, faith, and hope and love were essential. Those three things, one simply had to have in one’s survival kit. As water, food and air were essential for the human body, these three spiritual gifts were essential for the life of an individual and the life of the human community until the Lord came again.

Over the years I have been a minister, I have realized that these three spiritual gifts are also essential to the mission of Christ’s church. I think of you – of Morningside – as example “A” in this regard. What has sustained Morningside Church for the past 83 years, if not faith in God? If not love for God and if not love for one another? If not hope

that beyond the trials and suffering of any one challenging period, there would be fulfillment of the promises of God? No matter what was going on at any given time, the great promises of God to sustain God's own people through the rough waters would hold up. You held on to those promises and that hope for dear life, and here we are.

I think that 1/10 of 1 ounce of hope is all anybody really needs. We have a couple of mothers-to-be in the Morningside congregation: women whose pregnancies are allegedly coming to an end, though there are times when, to them I am sure, it seems doubtful. They endure uncomfortable days when they can't sleep or bend down to buckle their shoes, but they find the strength to endure through their hope and confidence that a baby will be born. When the baby is born, whatever suffering or incapacity that had to be endured will be almost immediately forgotten, because the hope has been fulfilled.

I spent some time last week re-reading one of the great sermons preached in the 20th century. It was preached by theologian Paul Tillich and is entitled "The Right to Hope."⁽¹⁾ He traces the struggle to hope throughout the Old Testament, as the Hebrew people faced catastrophe upon catastrophe, and how in the New Testament, the struggle continued in spite of the presence of the Son of God right in the midst of human affairs, and how one had to hope against hope, after Jesus was crucified. A couple of Sundays ago, we thought about the two men who were leaving Jerusalem on the Road to Emmaus when a stranger appeared beside them. He asked them what they were talking about, and they answered, "We had hoped that the one who was crucified would be the one to redeem Israel." They had hoped; he was killed. Later on, though, the two came to recognize the risen Lord at table. Though many others had encounters with the risen Christ, before his ascension into heaven, they still had to hope against hope after he was gone, because they believed that he would return soon, very soon. But he didn't. Actually, he hasn't come back yet, has he?

As time passes by the year, by the decade, by the century, it is hard to maintain hope.

It was especially hard in those early days. To the disheartened Roman Christians, Paul wrote, "If you are discouraged, remember that you are in very good company. The whole cosmos is waiting. The only way to make it through these tiresome days is to keep hoping, keep remembering that the hope one sees is not hope. Who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

For some of you, what I have just read may be your favorite Bible verse. It is on my list of least favorite Bible verses. That is one reason I am preaching on this topic today. I have an argument with Paul on this. I can't hope for something when there is absolutely no evidence anywhere that what I am hoping for exists now or ever has existed. To top things off, Paul makes a strong recommendation for the two side dishes that come with hope: patience and waiting. Those are two very unappealing aspects of life to me.

I remember standing in line some years ago. Al and I were waiting to buy tickets for a movie one Saturday afternoon, and the guy in front of us turned around and said, "Let me ask you something. Which do you think moves faster, a glacier or this line?" What makes waiting bearable to me is to see a little something of what I am hoping for. I'm really going to argue with Paul a bit here. He says, "Hope that is seen is not hope". I say, "I need to see something." It doesn't have to be big, it just has to be a sign, some little sign, something green and hopeful breaking through the concrete of hopelessness.

Tillich distinguishes between genuine hope and foolish hope. Hope is foolish when there is nothing at all to indicate when what one hopes for will ever come to pass. (I have an ally in my argument with Paul the Apostle!) For example, "if a daydreamer expects to become something that has no relation to his present state, externally or internally, he is a fool." If you are not given gifts that make you graceful in your body, you will waste a lot of time trying to be a ballet dancer. It would be a foolish hope for me to want to be an opera singer, because I just can't sing very well. Even Walter Huff couldn't make me qualified for the choir. That's foolish hope. On the other hand, a young man who lives in the housing project in Atlanta and who comes from a fatherless home, raised by a single mother, grows up hoping that he will be a star athlete. That is a legitimate hope, even though the odds are against him, because he has a mother who believes in him, and he had innate talent to begin with.

Foolish hopes are what lead people into dead end lives, rather than the lives they are supposed to live, using the talents and potential God gave them. Foolish hopes can wreck a life; foolish hopes can wreck a community or a nation.

To me, one of the most dangerous kinds of philosophy is that which leads people to dream up utopias. Having no grounding in reality but only in ideals, utopias take no account of human imperfection, and they inevitably fail.

Have you been watching the HBO series about John and Abigail Adams? One of the reasons I like it so much is that the founders of our nation are not wearing halos around their heads, and if even if one is riding a white horse, he is riding it through the mud. Our nation became the great democracy that it did, because in the beginning there were people willing to engage in pushing the ideals of democracy through the real stuff of life. Motivated by the grand idea of freedom, they remained grounded in the real world. They took into account the need for social order under the law.

We should not ever expect perfection in ourselves, in our nation, in our church. That would be foolish hope. Genuine hope knows that only God is perfect and that only God can make anything else perfect. What we can expect is to make things better. We can and ought to act in hope, trusting that the day will come when God will be “all in all.” Everything will be set right. In the meantime, we work to make things better. When we do what we can do, that for which we hope – eternity - breaks into time. We believe that God is Lord of the future, just as God is Lord of the past. In the meantime, we gladly accept our role as implementers of God’s redeeming love for the world and for its creatures.

I like the idea of hope as being like a seed. In the seed of a tree, for instance, all the ingredients for everything you could ever hope for in a tree are all already present. There is the potential for the trunk and the leaves, the limbs and fruit. You plant the seed, not knowing if the tree will grow, but hoping that it will, that all its potential will one day be fulfilled. That is not naïve optimism; that is genuine hope. (2)

I have a little dog named Miss Patsy Cline. I tell her lies almost every day. She likes naïve optimism. No matter what’s happening, I say, “You’re all right; it’s going to be all right.” Now, it might be the day she is going to the vet for a shot, or she might be hearing thunder and trembling. My goal is to calm her down by whatever means it takes. Naïve

optimism is good enough for dogs, but it doesn't work for human beings. Hopeful realism is what works for us.

I am against naïve optimism, but I want to say an even stronger word against chronic pessimism. Chronic pessimism, with a little low-grade despair thrown in, is what will kill you. It will kill a church. It will kill a family. It will kill a nation. Let us not, in these troubled times in the United States, give up on our country. Let us never do that. Let us throw ourselves into the promise of this country, and wherever we see a seed of that which is generative and that reflects the ideals with which we were founded, let's get out there with our watering cans and do all we can to make good and hopeful things rise up across the landscape.

Hope is the antidote to despair. Despair always leads to paralysis. Hope is the pre-condition for saving the planet as we talked last week. It is the means by which we will revitalize our democracy. Hope is the pre-condition for getting the mess in your relationships straightened out. If you don't think it's possible, then by golly, it will not be possible.

One thing is for certain, we will never have a better world if we lose hope that there can be a better world. A young person was asked what he thought was the biggest challenge facing us today. He answered, "I don't know and I don't care. And I don't care enough to figure out why I don't care."

Do you recall the words inscribed over the gate of hell in Dante's *Inferno*? "Abandon hope, you who enter here."

If I had to summarize the message of the Bible in a couple of sentences I would say something like this: God the Holy Spirit is "everywhere the giver and renewer of life."⁽³⁾ God is in the business of new life, new creation. How do I know it? I know it because Christ, who was dead, is now alive, and is Lord over all. He is the Lord of life. And because he is, then I am able to put all my weight down on the reality of his kingdom. Through faith, I believe that of his kingdom, there will be no end. I choose to live in hope, not on the basis of a lot of evidence, but every now and then, I see extraordinary love,

extraordinary courage, extraordinary commitment, and I know that God's team is going to win in the end. That's the team I have signed up with.

Seventeen centuries ago, theologian St. Augustine wrote of the generative power of hope. "Hope has two daughters," he said, "Anger and Courage. Anger at what is and what ought not to be, and courage to make what ought to be come to be." I believe hope is the only force that can alter the future.

Some years ago, a mother of a child who had gotten into bad trouble, said to me, when I asked about her son, "Oh, Joanna, I don't know. Sometimes I think he's just hopeless." But she didn't think he was hopeless all the time, because they got the kid into counseling, into a different school. They never gave up on him. They clung for dear life to that little seed of goodness and promise that was in him that they had glimpsed a long time ago. They hoped for him, and he came to hope for himself. Today he's an OK kid, with decent grades, a girlfriend, and the goalie spot on his soccer team.

We don't always win when we are hopeful. To be sure, there are defeats aplenty. Things don't always turn out right, but every time things do turn out right, we get to see again that the kingdom of God is among us.

I have a little theological trouble with the Second Coming and the idea of Jesus riding in on the clouds. It's hard to get my mind around that concept, but I have no trouble believing that the eternal makes regular appearances in time. I close with something I once read, in the writings of Lewis Thomas. He told of walking along a beach one day, and as he looked ahead, he saw a lone person walking down the beach. The shore was covered with hundreds of starfish that had been washed up on the sand, washed up so far that as the waves receded, they were stranded in the blistering sun. He watched as the person before him bent over, picked up a starfish and threw it back. He bent over, picked up a second starfish and threw it back. On and on he went. Thomas caught up with the man and said, "Why in the world are you doing that? You'll never be able to get them all back into the sea. What difference are you making?"

The starfish caster said, "It makes all the difference in the world to the ones I have picked up and thrown back." It makes all the difference in the world what we do.

“Be prepared to give an account for the hope that is within you,” the Bible says. (I Peter 3:15) I hope that when you come to church, and Chris or I stand up here and say something, that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, you will leave here, more hopeful than when you came.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

(1) Paul Tillich, “The Right to Hope,” preached at Harvard’s Memorial Church, March 1965. Many of the ideas in my sermon were generated by Professor Tillich’s masterpiece.

(2) Ibid.

(3) A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)