

We Are a Community of Hope!!

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Feb. 23, 2025

The Beloved Community of First Baptist Church KCMO

Text: Romans 15:13

If we were not a community of hope, there would be no point to our church's existence. That is why we exist: we exist to be a community of hope in the midst of a world of despair. As I said two weeks ago, our hope is not based in external evidence, it is based in confidence that our God will see us through. It is based in confidence that God has the ultimate say. It is based in confidence that while it may seem bleak at this particular point, there can always be a brighter tomorrow. It is based in confidence that God is planting seeds of hope amidst our despair. God is a Seeds of Hope Planter around the world, especially in the soil of hurt, betrayal, violence, and disregard, wherever it exists.

We are a community of hope. I know this because I have experienced this on countless times in over 11 years as your pastor. Sometimes, discouraging things happen in any church. For example, the pandemic hit. And before the pandemic, we typically had between 70 and 80 people attending worship. And after the pandemic, we have between 40 and 50 attending. This sanctuary seats over 450 people. Wouldn't it feel somewhat hopeless that we have not been able to rebuild our attendance, or the size of our congregation, to the way it was just a few years ago?

Isn't this a sign of our failure? But what if we had grown to over 200 people attending every Sunday, but the 200 newcomers were largely disinterested in the kind of church we seek to be. Or the 200 are difficult people, intent of having things their way, only they can't agree on which way? Give me 40 any Sunday of folks who hang together well. We don't have to agree on everything. We don't need to have the same perspectives. But we are united in what makes this congregation special. And united in making this a safe place outside the racial silo's that predominate on Sunday mornings throughout America.

Friends, we have discovered growth in a different way. There is hardly a Sunday that goes by that we have fewer than 100 households viewing our service on Facebook. And this doesn't include those visiting our website to watch our service, surely another audience. Now a "visit" on Facebook can be just for a moment, not necessarily for an hour. But many people who listen to our service do so not as one person, but often as two people. This is a sign of hope. We wish there was a way to connect with those households listening to our worship services. But unless you choose to identify yourselves, we don't know your identity. Just the count, and it's consistently and significantly higher over the past six months than ever before. We're reaching more and more people, maybe not in the former ways, but on-line through streaming our services. That just may be a sign of the times we are living in. And it surely is a sign of hope. God is saying to us, "behold, I am doing a New Thing in your midst!" And we are reaching more people than ever before. I was talking with a good friend, a fellow pastor, who said, "We are so proud that twenty people watch our service every week." I just kept quiet, but wouldn't he be amazed that we have over 100 people!

And isn't it possible that friends worshipping with us through live-streaming might turn to us in the midst of life's challenges or crises? Our challenge is to figure out how to be a congregation of the 40-50 in person and the 179 households who watched at least part of our service on-line on Feb. 9?

There is a great deal of chaos coming out of our nation's capital these days. Many are bewildered and befuddled by the pace and randomness of change. But my word of hope to you this morning is that pendulums of national opinion tend to swing back and forth. So, now, we are entering a time of more conservative retrenchment. If it goes too far in one direction, and it likely already has, you can just about count that the next election will send things moving the other direction. We cannot be complacent and whenever this or any other administration turns its back on the poor and working class in order to reward the upper class, we must be vigilant to express our opposition. Followers of Jesus can have it no other way.

So we must be active and be involved and express the values of our faith as publicly as is necessary. However, our hope is not based in evidence that suddenly things are turning brighter. No, not evidence, but confidence that there is a higher, more eternal, more infinite power at work that the world cannot control or defeat.

Paul was the product of a rabbinical education, studying under Gamaliel, a great Jewish teacher, and the line of separation in that day between Jew and Gentile was insurmountable. Here in our text from Romans today, Paul crosses the breach, the breach between Jew and Gentile: Welcome one another, Jew and Gentile. What Paul discovered in his ministry is that his preaching that Jesus was indeed the long-expected Messiah and that his resurrection is a God's sign of hope for all people, was received by only a few fellow Jews. So why did Paul always begin in a new city by preaching in synagogues? He wasn't expecting a warm response by his fellow Jews. His real audience was a group of Gentiles found in nearly all the synagogues of the Roman Empire. These Gentiles were called God-Fearers and they were attracted to Jewish synagogues because of their monotheistic faith, a faith in a loving and just God, as opposed to all the frivolous gods of the Romans and Greeks, who were often fierce, petty, jealous, mean-spirited, and vengeful. So God-fearers came to the synagogues to worship alongside the Jews. They were both welcomed by the Jews of the synagogue, but because they weren't willing to convert and become Jews, they were considered second-class, accepted, but not fully accepted; included but not fully included. They could be in the room, but not at the table. Some God-fearers were wealthy and well-connected, but some were very poor and some were slaves. A loving and just God attracted all of them to the synagogue.

Here comes Paul with his liberating message: "There is now no longer Jew or Gentile; male or female, free nor slave. For now, we are all one in Christ Jesus. You don't have to convert to Judaism to be a follower of the Way, a follower of Jesus." You can imagine this message didn't go over too well with many Jews, but it was an amazing and liberating message to the God-Fearers who joined Paul's cause in droves. They were now fully accepted in God's righteous fellowship. Paul quotes Isaiah, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to save the Gentiles and in him Gentiles shall have hope!"

Paul created brand new communities of hope, diverse communities of slaves and free, of Gentiles and Jews, of women and men standing in equality with each other. If you don't believe that, read Romans 16!

The Apostle Paul spoke to communities of hope who were undergoing severe persecution as followers of Jesus. And he wrote to the Corinthians, (2 Corinthians 4:8-9) "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed".

We are a community of hope and no amount of evidence that the world is going to hell in a handbasket can ever dissuade us, it does not turn us aside, it does not cause us to throw up our arms in defeat and give up. We are a community of hope. Say that with me: "We are a Community of Hope!"

And just as God plants seeds of hope so we, as followers of Jesus, are also called to plant seeds of hope in one another. If one among us gets discouraged or downcast, we are to ever-so-gently, without judgment and ever-so-humbly, plant seeds of hope, hope based on confidence in God's Better Way. We don't need to wait for the evidence to turn up, we already have the confidence. If someone beside you in the pew says, "I might as well give up!" Tell them a story about why you are hopeful!

We are a community of hope. Say that with me: "We are a community of hope!". And just as God plants seeds of hope throughout the world, so we, as followers of Jesus are also called to plant seeds of hope throughout Greater Kansas City. We should plant seeds among those neighbors who have lost their jobs, lost their marriages, lost their friendship circle, lost their reputations, lost their health, lost their homes, lost their immigration status. We can plant seeds of hope by standing up for the marginalized in our city, for the homeless, for the refugees, for the formerly incarcerated.

And just as God plants seeds of hope throughout the world, so we must also plant seeds of hope around the world. This church has always been a globally-connected church. We care about the wider world. We care about Nicaragua and AMOS. We care about the Welcoming Church in Seoul, South Korea. We care about unaccompanied minors who come into the heart of America under the protection of Daline and Dalie Rodriguez Ortet, who, up to this point, have provided care for them, but now those funds are threatened. We care about Zimbabwe and the forward work of the Muteo's there. We care about our fellow Baptists in Ukraine, one of the largest religious minorities in that land. We care about non-Christians in the USA who are reasonably worried because White Christian Nationalists now lead many of our federal Cabinets and Departments. We care about refugees on the border and the danger that it poses to women like those finding safe refuge at Deborah's House in Tijuana. We are called to plant seeds of hope around the world.

We are a community of hope! Say it with me: "We are a community of hope!" And our hope is not based on headlines in the morning newspaper or news through social media. We are a community of hope based upon our confidence that God still has the guiding hand on history! We shall not be dissuaded. We cannot be discouraged. We must never turn aside.

Let no one say to you that I retired at this moment because I lost my hope in you! That is not true! That is far from the truth! I have great hope in Pastor Dezo! Why do you think I urged you to set up a co-pastorate in 2017? The primary reason was succession...that we would have a younger pastor ready to take the reins when I got old. And folks, I'm old!! I'm not tired. I'm not worn! I'm not ready to sit in a rocking chair. But it's transition time, which can introduce lots of hope throughout this congregation.

In a traditional setting, I would announce my retirement as the Senior Pastor of this church and you then would have to go through up to two years without strong and steady pastoral leadership. You'd call in an interim, and more or less tread water until a new pastor arrives, and who, several years later, grows to love you as I have loved you. And you just have to hope and pray that this new pastor, whom you do not know, will be a good fit and will choose to stay with you. But ours has been a co-pastorate and with Pastor Dezo's leadership, you can tackle your future from Day One! No treading water!

I have so much hope in you! Is my hope that we remain in this large building for years to come, no matter the cost? No, that is not my hope. Because one reason I am retiring, honestly, is that holding all the pieces of staff, maintenance and upkeep on this huge building and property gets tiresome and it zaps some of our energy to do more visionary things for the Lord! But I am hopeful there will be wonderful opportunities ahead for us to right-size and get into a new building in a new location that will be an exciting new center for worship and service. And because of that, I say:

We are a community of hope! Say it again:

We shall not be discouraged, no matter the signs about us.

Isaiah reminds us: We shall not grow weary, we shall not grow faint, no matter how exhausting the news of the day will be!

All who place their hope in the Lord Jesus shall renew their strength; they shall soar like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, walk and not faint.”(Isaiah40:31)

Say it again:

We are a community of hope, and our God will take us from where we are to where we need to be! Because...We are a community of hope! Amen.