

“The Sources of Hope: The Wisdom of the Ancestors”

Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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C. R. KENNEDY, *The Servant in the House*

Behold the church. You must understand, this is no dead pile of stones and unmeaning timber. It is a LIVING thing.

When you enter it you hear a sound--a sound as of some mighty poem chanted. Listen long enough, and you will learn that it is made up of the beating of human hearts, of the nameless music of souls--that is, if you have ears to hear. If you have eyes, you will presently see the church itself--a looming mystery of many shapes and shadows, leaping sheer from floor to dome. The work of no ordinary builder!

The pillars of it go up like the brawny trunks of heroes; the sweet flesh of men and women is molded about its bulwarks, strong, impregnable; the faces of little children laugh out from every corner stone; the terrible spans and arches of it are the joined hands of comrades; and up in the heights and spaces are inscribed the numberless musings of all the dreamers of the world. It is yet building--building and built upon.

Sometimes the work goes on in deep darkness; sometimes in blinding light; now under the burden of unutterable anguish; now to the tune of great laughter and heroic shoutings like the cry of thunder.

Sometimes, in the silence of the night-time, one may hear the tiny hammerings of the comrades at work up in the dome--the comrades that have climbed ahead.

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These are the words of Sister Joan Chittister who wrote the book – the only book - you'll ever need to read on hope.

Where in pain does hope lie? Hope is built into struggle. We collect stories of courage like treasures from the deep. We guard them as part of the collective memory that makes all of us more human. I carry in my heart an image of a young man standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. I think of him and breathe a purer air. ... I remember young black men, all in white shirts and ties, being beaten for sitting at a lunch counter in segregated Alabama. *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*

This sermon is the second in a series on the sources of hope, this one about the inspiration we garner from our ancestors. An ancestor's story is eternal. There is no expiration date on a story and in fact, through time we continue to learn from these stories. What's even more amazing, we learn more about our ancestor ... those who we claim through family lineage as well as those we claim through our cultural heritage... long after they are long gone.

And through the stories that are passed down and passed around, we muster up the hope we need to do the hard things.

Although I cannot claim the young man in front of the tank as my direct ancestor, that image is a way to breathe air that is more pure than before I conjure the image. Over and over and over again over these many years since, that young man conjures hope for a more just world and our ability to keep hope alive and the way to justice paved with courage such as his own.

And the young black men and woman at the counter. And all the people from all walks of life who marched in Washington DC in 1963 with Dr. King.

And the young sick man in the emergency room who waits 26 hours for a room.

For 17 years I've told this story. But until last year the most profound facet of the story eluded me. Here's the whole story.

It was near the end of my friend Billy's life – 1996. February. We'd spend 26 hours in the emergency room waiting for a bed. A young resident – very conscience, trying his best – declared that Billy had tuberculosis, although we, battle-worn and all-knowing, knew that ultimately the diagnosis would be PCP: pneumocystis carinii pneumonia. He'd had PCP twice before. We were familiar. No surprise, there was no talking to the young doc so we were banished – I kid you not – to a broom closet for the long wait. At 4:00 a.m. we were released from the closet to a room. Billy was being wheeled down the hall on a gurney when the angel Mary floats down the hall. (Mary was Billy's doctor and was his partner's doctor as well. Joseph has been dead for seven years by now so Mary and Billy and I go way back.) She confirms what we knew would be revealed. TB: no. PCP: yes.

To be clear, PCP is not good news. The treatment is nothing short of torture.

By this time I am nearly delirious. Billy IS delirious *and* deathly ill to boot. But through the delirium he manages to ask Mary, "What if we don't treat this?" The meaning of his question eludes my frazzled brain until I witness Mary's emphatic response, "Oh no Bill! No. We're not there yet." And then I get it. I understand what he's asking.

I warn you, my reaction was not my most gracious moment.

I jumped onto the underneath bar of the gurney so I could get right in my suffering friend's face and I said, "Oh no William. I don't have time for you to die. I don't have time for a memorial service and I don't have time to break down your apartment. I'm going to China and bringing home a little girl and *you have to meet her.*"

At which point Mary gently put her hands on my shoulders and guides me down and off of the gurney.

The next day I casually asked Billy if he had any memory of the night before. "All I remember is you telling me that you didn't have time for me to die." But he relented and suffered through the treatment and on June 2nd, he met our Lily Jun. And three weeks later, he died.

Fast forward 16 years and now I am the one in the hospital bed. Many of you know that I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer last year. Through that long year and my own suffering, I learned more deeply about Billy's. It was shocking. Most shocking and humbling was realizing that he agreed to that terrible, terrible treatment when he was truly ready to die. Sixteen years later, I realized what I had asked of him. And in that realization, I was amazed by the depth of his generosity. To endure brutal treatments with the hope of adding years or decades to one's life is one thing. To endure such treatments to hopefully, to *perhaps* add months to one's life is quite another.

I called up this memory often while enduring chemotherapy. I called up my friend's decision to endure, to keep on – if even for a few months – because in his case, meeting the new member of our family was worth the struggle. That he loved me so much that he would make such a choice gave me hope and in that hope, strength. I love the family he left behind and I love life as much as he did; so if he could endure, so could I.

*Where in pain does hope lie? Hope is built into struggle. We collect stories of courage like treasures from the deep.*

Hope buoyed by the ancestors.

You hear these stories all the time. Just this past week, the WNBA player who started a foundation after a beloved aunt died, inspired by her aunt's legacy.

And in the larger world, the people who on a quiet August morning 50 years ago got up, prayed for strength, worked together, got on a bus to Washington DC, and followed their leaders. They were hot and they were tired. But you know what else they were?

They were filled with hope.

Yesterday, immigrants some of them surely without documentation got in vans and came to New London. They prayed for strength, worked together, and were filled with hope. The room was filled with hope that lifted up the crowd. "We draw our strength from the very despair in which we have been forced to live. We shall endure," said Cesar Chavez, one ancestor whose spirit was surely in the room.

Hope was in the room, friends. Hope "hewn from a mountain of despair" – said Dr. King.

And this place. This house of hope. Behold the church, Friends. Said the wise man, "Behold the church. You must understand this is no dead pile of stones and unmeaning timber. It is a living thing."

It is a living thing that breeds hope. That prepares us to go forth from this place into our lives keeping kindled a tenacious hope. "The church has left the building!" says a colleague of mine. I love that. And when the church leaves the building, we bring a sense of hope in our "beating hearts through the nameless music of souls."

Every time we name the ancestors who built up this congregation they are drawn closer to us - even through the mists of death. All of those who toiled to keep our doors open and ministries strong.

"Sometimes, in the silence of the night-time, one may hear the tiny hammerings of the comrades at work up in the dome – the comrades that have climbed ahead." They climbed ahead but we know them still. Their stories bring us hope. Encourage us to act boldly to keep bright a beacon of liberal religion and the hope it spreads within and beyond our walls.

For that's what we are about, Friends. Drawing up our hope and moving forward while joining hands with our ancestors who are with us still. Their stories of strength are eternal and bring us strength for the journey.

So, go well into this day ... filled with kindness, legacy and yes, with hope born of struggle.

Amen.