

## **Remember To Hope!**

Based on Psalm 147:1-11 & Romans 5:1-8

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to FCUCC Gaylord, Aug 26, 2018

For the vast majority of my life, I have been a “glass is half empty” kind of guy. My childhood nicknames bear witness to the undisputable fact of my pessimism. From time to time, I’d get called “Eeyore,” the forlorn, gloomy donkey from Winnie the Pooh. Another of my “friends” called me “Glum.” Do you remember him from the old Gulliver’s Travels cartoon? He was the one who was always crying, “We’re doomed! We’ll never make it! Where’s Gulliver when we need him?”

It’s never been even the slightest mystery where my pessimism comes from; it came from growing up in an alcoholic home. Every day in that household was relentlessly the same. The routine was so firmly established, that at any given moment in the waking part of the day, I could tell you exactly where my dad would be, what he would be drinking, and how he had successfully hidden it from my mom. The fact that things never changed in my alcoholic household made me completely give up any and all hope that things would ever change.

I carried that pessimism with me when I left that home in Bay Village, Ohio and went onto college. I carried that pessimism to graduate school with me, and even took it out into the work force. Though I wasn’t around my dad and his drinking much at all anymore, the way I had taught myself to expect disappointment, to expect others to let me down, and to forever wait for the other shoe to drop has stayed with me for a long, long time.

I didn’t realize it, and I certainly didn’t intend it, but I gave up on hope at about age 13, and I didn’t get it back until I was nearing 50. That’s a long, long time to be without one of the greatest gifts God intends us all to have.

Alcoholics and other addicts live a life of hopelessness, and if we aren’t careful, we as family members will live without hope too. The clutches of addiction are so ensnaring, that even the most tenacious, determined battlers often can’t escape it. An alcoholic’s hopelessness comes from feelings and thoughts they have that simply can’t be shed. An addict is not only addicted to his/her substance of choice, he’s addicted to a cycle of thought patterns, negative thought patterns, almost voices inside his head saying, “You’re no good. You’re not strong enough to beat this. You’re a drunk and you always will be. Think of all

the times you told yourself and others you were going to quit, but you never did and you never will.”

And let’s be clear, you don’t have to be addicted to some substance to your own thought patterns and perspectives. Negative thought patterns – all those tapes that play over and over again in our minds – are a source of hopelessness for us all. The path to health and wholeness for the addict and the rest of us involves getting rid of the pessimistic poison that circles around and around in our heads. In A.A. they call it “Stinkin’ thinkin.”

I had a conversation just this week with a recovering friend of mine, who admitted that he nearly took his own life as a result of the pain and hopelessness he felt. He had a loaded gun in his hand and very nearly pulled the trigger. I asked him what he thought it was that helped him find hope again. Without hesitation, he said, “It was the other guys in A.A. Looking around that room and listening to them, I knew that many of them had been just as low and just as hopeless as I was. Somehow, they pulled through, kicked the addiction, and led normal, happy lives. That gave me hope that maybe I could too.”

This is why it’s so critically important that we share our stories with one another – and not in a pollyann-ish, gloss-over-the-ugly-stuff kind of way. We followers of Jesus need to be honest and transparent about our failures, our miserable periods, our battles with the demon of despair, so that our struggles might serve as a beacon of hope for someone else. The reason I selected Romans 5 or the morning passage is that it links suffering with hope in a profound and powerful way. Paul writes, “We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope.” I think of Paul’s words here as stepping stones on the road to hope. Paul is emphasizing that hope isn’t something that just suddenly appears. Instead it is something that is wrought through the hot fires of suffering, perseverance, and character.

My own experience resonates with and affirms Paul’s contention here. I confessed earlier that I lived roughly 37 years of my life – from age 13 to 50 – without hope. What I didn’t tell you is what it was that brought hope back into my life. What did it was a six-year period of time when everything that could have gone wrong in my life went wrong in my life. I went through a divorce with Eloise’s mother; I lost my job, I lost my health insurance and then took a very costly fall; I lost my home, and along with it 50% of my time with my one and only daughter. For

six years, I scraped and clawed just to make ends meet. At one point, I was actually working 5 part time jobs. I was devastatingly lonely and, yes, hopeless. But the strangest thing happened. Someone who was commiserating with me asked if I was afraid of what might happen next and of the future. Almost immediately, I heard myself say, “No. What do I have to be afraid of? Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong and I’m still here! I’m still standing. I know now that I can survive...no matter what happens, I will survive.”

I think it was at that point that I began to understand what true hope really is. Hope grows as we successfully navigate each chapter of suffering that befalls us. Hope is wrought in the fires of suffering, and thus, some of the most hopeful people I know are the ones who’ve endured the most hardship in their lives.

But there’s another ingredient in the DNA of hope, and it is found in the last couple verses we read in Romans 5. Listen to these verses once again, verses 6-8:

“You see, just at the right time, when we were still powerless, still sinning, Christ died for us. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrated his love for us in this: that while we were still sinning, Christ died for us.”

The idea that Paul is trying to convey here is that God doesn’t wait around to love, accept, and embrace people until they get their lives together and somehow “deserve” it. God goes ahead and loves and accepts and embraces us **WHILE WE ARE STILL SINNING!** From an alcoholic’s standpoint, Paul might say, “While we were still drinking Christ died for us.” It’s like God makes a preemptive strike on all of us, and it’s a strike of love; it’s a strike of forgiveness and mercy that God gives us long before we deserve it.

I don’t know about you, but to me that is so incredibly hopeful. God goes ahead and rolls the dice on us – on **ALL** of us – saying “I’m going to go ahead and love you and promise to be with you forever – both in this life and in the great beyond, whether you’ve got your you-know-what together or not.

Do you see the hope in that? Can you feel the hope in that, that the God of the universe gives us everything and then some **WHILE** we are still sinning, **WHILE** we’re still stuck in our stinking thinking, **WHILE** we

are still drinking or drugging or being selfish. How different this gospel story of ours would have been if God had held her love in front of us, dangling it out there like a carrot, just beyond our reach. How different this gospel would be if Jesus had said, "If you love me, follow me, and keep all of my commandments, then my Father and I will give you our love." Or "IF you live a good, clean, morally outstanding life, then I will offer you healing and salvation. Folks, God didn't wait around, withholding love from us until we deserved it. In one of the most outrageous expressions of hope in human history, God demonstrated his love for us WHILE we were still sinning.

I am no longer a glass is half empty kind of guy. I am no longer an Eeyore or a Glum. In fact, right along with Paul, I can say that I now rejoice in my sufferings, because I know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope...and hope, Paul writes, "does not disappoint us." Amen.