

7/5/20

The Now of Hope

Today is the last sermon in our series on hope.

The problem with understanding the role that hope can play in our lives is that the word “hope” in English actually has many meanings, and that some types of hope can do more harm than good. In fact, of the different kinds of hope there is only one “good hope.”

Let me describe for you three kinds of hope: The first is wishing for a specific outcome. This can be tricky. If you have your heart set on getting a Barbie doll for Christmas (“I hope I get a Barbie, I hope, I hope, I hope”) and if you end up getting a Chatty Cathy instead, you might be devastated. Worst Christmas Ever. Pinning your hopes and dreams on something that may or may not occur is not a recipe for happiness. We wish to control the future with our hopes, but God has not given us that ability, so we often end up feeling helpless and bereft.

A second type of hope can be even more dangerous to our mental health; that is the hope that something or someone will come along in the future to rescue us. “Sir Galahad, Sir Galahad, I hope and pray that you are on your way, for I am wallowing in the depths of misery.” The danger of that kind of thinking is that if you practice this kind of hope, and get good at it—because practice makes perfect—you will actually be teaching yourself to dwell on how miserable you are; your rescue will always lie in the future, and you will remain in your miserable “present.” Misery does exist in the world; but you cannot simply wish your way out of it!

The third kind of hope is the good kind. Paradoxically, it is grounded not in the future, like the other hopes, but in the present. Before I describe it further, let's think about the concept of "time" for a moment, because "hope" has everything to do with the passage of time.

The past, the present, the future—we often think of "time" as a long line, extending way into the past in one direction, and way into the future in the other direction. In this model, the "present" is just a tiny sliver, inching its way from the past to the future. Here we are today, all of us in this tiny sliver, with the limitless past behind us, and a vast future lying ahead.

But the true nature of time is very different. The past and the future do not actually exist for us; the present is not a tiny sliver; rather, it is all-encompassing. Life can never be experienced in the past or the future; we only have the ever-unfolding present in which to live our lives, to love and be loved, to receive God's grace. All of our reality takes place in the present; the past and the future are mere abstractions. The present may be informed by the past, the future may be predicated on actions we take in the present, but the past and future remain mental constructs of those of us living in the present moment.

"Wait a minute," you may say, "are you claiming the past and future do not exist? We know time passes—we have calendars and clocks, we make appointments and keep them, we watch our children and grandchildren growing up, and for that matter, we keep getting older, too!" Well, if you are little bewildered by how the all-encompassing present somehow devours the future and becomes the past—you're not alone. Time has long been an important subject of study in religion, philosophy, and science, but it's true nature and definition has consistently eluded scholars.

But one thing is obvious: though we may think about the past and the future, we can only live in the present. And thinking too much about what has already occurred or what is yet to occur, can blind us to what is going on all around us. Just as we must listen to a song moment by moment, we must live our lives one day at a time.

Consider the Lord's prayer. Jesus taught us to pray "Give us this day our daily bread." We can reflect on the layers of meaning in this simple phrase, but one thing is clear: we can only eat our daily bread today; we cannot eat it yesterday or tomorrow. All of God's gifts are presented to us in the here and now.

That is why the great spiritual masters remind us to to "Be Here Now." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clearly states, in the Scripture that Zephie read for us, "do not worry about tomorrow." He provides the "blessed assurance" that is the foundation of hope: God will take care of us, now and always. Worrying about the future only takes us out of the present, and it is only in the present that we can apprehend the Divine and receive the gifts of Heaven.

So that is the third kind of hope, the kind we put on banners in our church, the kind that the Apostle Paul talks about, that with faith, is only just below "agape," love itself. It is a hope that fills us with confidence, because we know God is with us now, we experience God's constant presence, and we know God will never abandon us. Though times may be tough, we can truly say "it is well with my soul," because we trust the divine plan; we know in our hearts that the Universe is unfolding as it should.

Sometimes the present can be filled with stress and strife, and it is human nature to want to escape suffering by putting all of our eggs in the basket we call the future. But consider the sound advice contained in a wonderful little book by the American

Buddhist, Pema Chodron, The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Loving-kindness.

In teaching about how to love ourselves and others, Chodron reminds us that we can only experience real joy when we live in the present and stop running from pain. We must learn to open ourselves up to life in all circumstances; when we embrace the happiness and heartache, inspiration and confusion, and all the twists and turns that are a natural part of life, we can begin to discover a true wellspring of courageous love that's been within our hearts all along. Therein lies is the “wisdom of no escape.”

Helen and Mary described the cycle, in their sermons in the Hope series, of Orientation, Dis-orientation, and Re-orientation. We have all experienced those periods when everything is running smoothly; other times of disorder; and the times when the work is done to restore order and harmony. These are natural cycles at work at all times, all around us. And we have reason to believe that we are not just going in circles, but all the time moving forward as humans on earth to a more peaceful, just and loving world. One of Dr. King's favorite quotations was from the nineteenth century abolitionist, Rev. Theodore Parker, who said "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." This sense, that we are taking steps, though they may be “baby steps,” and sometimes two steps forward and one step back—this sense that we are indeed making progress towards a New Jerusalem, bolsters our sense of hope. The Old Testament stories of retribution and the destruction of enemies give way to the ethics of the New Lawgiver—Jesus instructing us to love our enemies. That is moral progress. We see in our country gradual yet fundamental changes over the centuries—the end of slavery, the granting of rights to women, the increasing acceptance of the LGBTQ community—and we can allow ourselves to be encouraged that a Divine Plan is unfolding that brings us closer to Heaven on Earth, knowing we still have far to go.

But God's plan takes place in God's time, which is different from our time. Consider the verse we sang in today's hymn: "A thousand ages in your sight are like an evening gone..." Though we remain always in the present, and find our hope there in God's bright and constant love, God's got the whole world in her hands, and time itself, too; even the future is contained in the Mind of God.

The great writers of the Holy Scriptures understood this. For example, take the well-known story about Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac. When their mother, Rebekah, felt them struggling in her womb, she inquired of God, and was answered with this couplet:

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger."

How did God know what would happen years into the future? Obviously, the same way God knows all things always: God's time is different from our time.

So in conclusion, if we are to hope a "good hope," a hope that is not selfish, a hope that is not always just out of reach of our misery, it must be a hope that is grounded not in the future, but in the present. Right here and now, God is with us, God loves us, God is taking care of us, and we have God's unbreakable promise that this will be true forever. Though God's time is God's time, and beyond our understanding, we have been given the gift of the Present, the most precious gift possible. Let us thank the Giver, let us trust in God's plan, and let us find our hope today in God's constant love. Amen