

“HOPE AND CHANGE” SERMON FOR HOUSE OF HOPE PRES. CHURCH
MAY 29, 2022 Julie Neraas

Introduction

Having been apprenticed to the subject of hope for a very long time, and having written two books about it, I am wondering why I have not availed myself of learning from this community what makes for a house of hope? Your website says that it's more than a word here. Let us have a conversation about this sometime. I would like to know YOUR thoughts on this subject.

In the meantime, since I am the preacher today, what I would like to do in this short time together, is to bring together hope and change; two vast subjects that are pressing in upon us from all sides, and they are intricately bound up with each other.

I

But first: let's talk about what hope is. I would say it's the sense of a way forward; it's a learned confidence in life that believes things will work out, and if there is no way around a problem or problems, that there will be resources to deal with them. This four letter word is not big enough to encompass what hope really is, which is about how people endure. And it's more than a virtue we exercise, it's something primal and instinctual. It is something we do, more than something we have.

If you think hope has something to do with butterflies and flowers you have not watched a news reel about a family putting their lives at risk to push off on a rickety raft across an angry ocean in search of a better shore. You have not seen a parent whose child has virulent cancer, and who will knock down any possible door that offers the possibility of help. Hope can be an axe you break down doors with. It can spawn a revolution. It is that fierce, it is that muscular.

Mature hope has its eyes wide open to life as it is, because the way to the future begins with actual conditions in the present. Hope and truth must sit side by side. Hope is not buoyed by fake news, magical thinking or illusion. Genuine hope has to reckon with “the bitter, the sweet, the sour and the salty,” as the poet Marge Piercy has it. This makes it qualitatively different than

optimism; which is a lovely capacity on one level, but it can turn a blind eye towards reality, and that is not helpful.

Furthermore, as the former senior minister at my church, Plymouth Congregational in Mpls. says, “The primary quality of hope is not certainty, but vision and imagination. Hope is not certain of a particular future, but it can envision it...enough to continue anyway. Optimism lightens our load by promising a good end, even if the basis for the promise is faulty. Hope, by contrast, doesn’t lighten the load but strengthens us to carry the load and by claiming that it is all worth it” no matter how things turn out. For hope to be mature it must go beyond the fix-it level, and it cannot completely depend completely on outcomes, because a whole lot of things do not get fixed in this life, nor do they all turn out as we had wished. There is so much in our world that should not be so.

II

Some people seem to have hope so easily, they wake up in the morning and it’s simply there. Others have to struggle for it mightily. And the more we learn about the brain and biochemistry, we know that trying harder gets you nowhere if you are struggling with mental illness. Maybe we are becoming more compassionate toward those who are in this struggle.

Every one of us has something in their life that challenges hope. For me it is a chronic illness; I wonder what threatens your hope. Heaven knows, even a few headlines from the daily news threatens to send hope to the sidelines: horrific, continual, mind-numbing gun violence that slaughters school kids, Ukraine, a warming planet, a persistent Covid, systemic racism, the dangerous political divides in our country ..on and on it goes.

To have hope you have to believe you have a future. This is what is at the center of many young peoples’ anguish and their protests these days. I used to teach undergraduates; I have young adult nieces and nephews, so I know this. To have hope you have to believe that we can reverse the horrific tragedies and patterns in this country.

And while we are on the subject of education, as an educator for 27 years, what haunts me is that many students at Hamline University, (and this is also true at St. Cate’s, two institutions very near by) have several part time jobs, a mountain of debt, and they do not have enough to

eat. The food truck that used to come once a week has become a permanent food shelf. In the richest country in the world, how can this be?

III

Sometimes people say to me: “So, you’re the hope person, tell us: where should we look for hope when ours is stretched precariously thin?” I would say this: there are myriad sources of hope, and here are a few of them: beauty, the natural world, children, love, forgiveness, our capacity for renewal and resilience, people’s faithfulness to each other and to God, God’s faithfulness to us, and the awareness of another realm tucked into the folds of this one. There are many things that ARE right with the world right this very moment, and on my darkest days I prod myself to write down some of them to use as fuel for working against what should not be so.

But **the most** important and critical source of hope, given our present circumstances, is human beings’ ability to change. I was a chaplain in a treatment center at St. Mary’s Hospital for people struggling with drug and alcohol addiction, and I saw people change dramatically. It was and is a process that demands absolutely everything of people. They have to earn their sobriety choice by painstaking choice; letting go completely, or drastically, of some behaviors, their diet, primary relationships, habits, hobbies, ways of thinking, ways of relaxing and finding pleasure, and a relationship to a Higher Power.

This is summed up poignantly in a poem by the master of the modern short story, writer Raymond Carver, who struggled with alcoholism for much of his life. In fact, he thought he would die of it, and for good reason. He was hospitalized repeatedly for it, and his father and grand-father were both alcoholics. Here are a few lines from his poem “Gravy.”

Gravy.
Gravy, those past ten years.
Alive, sober, working, loving, and being loved
by a good woman. Eleven years
ago he was told he had six months to live
at the rate he was going....So he changed his ways
somehow. He quit drinking! And the rest?
After that it was all gravy. ...
....pure gravy. And don’t forget it.”

As an educator, what haunts me most.....

Every one of our problems: from climate change to racism, gun violence, the gaping crevass between rich and poor, challenges with education, health care, child care, government, demands that we change.

We in the church are riding the white caps of dramatic upheaval and change as well. Some have said Christianity is in the midst of changes that happen only every 500 years. This is no secret. We could list some of the causes and spell out the implications. But the bottom line is this: **our future depends upon our willingness to be the church in new ways. And the measure of our faith could be whether or not we are willing to lean in to change, instead of flat out resisting it.** I believe we know this at a gut level. The church, like other institutions, is always faced with two questions: what must we keep, and what must we be willing to let go of? As a consultant I have been asked to help a number of congregations in conflict and many of those “fights” if you will, come out of that tension. We need both tradition and renewal, old forms and new forms.

Sometimes when change is swift or dramatic our instinct is to batten down the hatches and become defensive, and smaller, if you will. The beloved Quaker writer Douglas Steere, said that if we are engaged in life, taking in new information, meeting new people, continually learning and having new experiences, then God/Life is revising our boundaries outward, so we are becoming larger, not smaller. It would be a tremendous boon to hope if we could extend our loyalties more widely and our identities more broadly. If we could live more as a “we” than as separate “I’s.”

A beloved writer and teacher named William Bridges has written two groundbreaking books about transition; some of you might know them. He says that it’s not so much change we fear as it is transition, because transition is the way we come to terms with change. And often, it’s about endings, which signifies loss, which brings up grief, and no one willingly chooses grief.

IV

Something to keep before us is the continual pattern in Jesus’ life of going on ahead of his followers, often quite literally. In Matthew’s Gospel after his encounter with Zaccheus, he heads deliberately into the Lion’s Den: Jerusalem, which terrifies his followers. In Mark’s Easter account of the women going to anoint Jesus’ body, a young man in a white robe tells them “He

has been raised...do not look for him there, because **he has gone ahead of you** to Galilee. Do not seek the living among the dead. In Luke's story of the couple walking toward Emmaus after the crucifixion, the moment they realized who their traveling companion was, **he disappeared, and went on ahead of them.** They cannot look to the past for clues about the future, because the future was beyond their imagining.

Friends, God is always ahead of us, beckoning us into the future, saying: come, come come come.....step forward....and we so often resist because heading into the future means moving away from the past. But the Buddhists are right: clinging only exacerbates our suffering.

If we are to have a future on our planet, we must change our ways dramatically. And to have a future as the church we must change. Maybe more faith communities will meet in homes and not in large, expensive buildings. Maybe to attract young people and young families we will have to be more ecumenical. We may have to be more nimble than we have been, and in ways we cannot yet imagine, to hold onto the core of things and let go of its old forms. This will require courage and sacrifice and yes, grieving. But we have done difficult things before. In fact, human beings have always had to transform loss and pain into beauty. We have always had to do difficult things. Hopefully – we will rise to meet this difficult chapter in our country's life and in earth's life. What change will you commit to? What changes do you feel compelled to make?

I will leave you with a thought from the mystic and theologian Cynthia Bourgeault, who spoke here at House of Hope some years ago. In her book *Mystical Hope* She writes; "At the macro level hope does not have to do with our private agendas, but it does have to do with moving us toward where it is going. Ultimately hope is divine energy and intelligence moving toward the accomplishment of its purpose; it makes use of us, rather than we of it." Ponder that idea: our dreams, desires and hopes are one of the ways God tugs us into the future. How might hope be using you?

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