

## ***Learning to Hope***

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*All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. This is where my hope lies.*

—Howard Thurman

Ancient Witness: Romans 8: 18, 22-25

In this Advent season, one of the great themes is *hope*. Today I want to talk about how hope is something we can learn, something we can actually cultivate in ourselves. To have hope is to have a kind of vision, a kind of perspective. It has to do with seeing both the long expanse of things and the heart of things. It is to see possibilities and feel eternity.

There is a great passage in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five* when one night a World War II movie is accidentally shown backwards:

*American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses, took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.*

*The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. . . There were still a few wounded American, though, and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.*

*When the bombers got back to the base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States, where factories were operating day and night, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did the work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody every again.*

Many of us would love to find that magical reverse switch to undo all the damage done in our personal lives and in the world. But living hopefully is more difficult than that. Historian Howard Zinn wrote about our need to be able to see long-term change if we are not to lose hope (from "The Optimism of Uncertainty"):

*We forget how often in this century we have been astonished by the sudden crumbling of institutions, by extraordinary changes in people's thoughts, by*

*unexpected eruptions or rebellion against tyrannies, by the quick collapse of systems of power that seemed invincible...*

*Revolutionary change does not come as one cataclysmic moment (beware of such moments!) but as an endless succession of surprises, moving zigzag toward a more decent society.*

*We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world.*

Zinn says to be hopeful we look not just at the long arc of history, but also more deeply in the present moments.

*We are surprised because we have not taken notice of the quiet simmerings of indignation, of first the faint sounds of protest, of the scattered signs of resistance that, in the midst of our despair, portent the excitement of change. (in *Soul of a Citizen*, by Paul Loeb)*

This reminds me of an analogy by Jacob Riis, early 20<sup>th</sup> century reformer:

*When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a 100 times without so much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it – but all that had gone before. (in *Soul of a Citizen*)*

To be hopeful is to have this kind of long-range vision. As someone said, “Anyone can count the seeds in an apple. Who can count the apples in a seed?”

Rebecca Solnit writes of a story (in *Hope in the Dark*) she heard of someone involved in a Women's Strike for Peace (WSP), the first great antinuclear movement in the United States:

*The woman from WSP told of how foolish and futile she had felt standing in the rain one morning protesting at the Kennedy White House. Years later she heard Dr. Benjamin Spock – who had become one of the most high-profile activists on this issue – say that the turning point for him was spotting a small group of women standing in the rain, protesting at the White House. If they were so passionately committed, he thought, he should give the issue more consideration himself.*

Paul Loeb has written that it is important to know that there are “unforeseen fruits of hope.”

*Even in a seemingly losing cause, one person may unknowingly inspire another and that person yet a third, who go on to change the world, or at least a small corner of it...*

Learning to hope is to learn to see these unforeseen fruits, the apples in the seed.

In our text this morning, Paul wrote, “For by hope we are saved.” But the followers of Jesus need to be reminded that there is a difference between hope and optimism. One of my favorite quotes is from Vaclav Havel when he said,

*Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless how it works out.*

In other words, optimism is the belief that things are going to happen the way you want them to, but hope is the conviction that doing something is the good and right thing to do. This distinction between hope and optimism is important. Many expected Jesus to be the next Jewish messiah, a mighty military leader like King David, who would liberate them and make Israel “great again.” They would no longer live in servitude and prosperity would reign. They were convinced that things were going to turn out well. But the optimistic followers of Jesus fell away when he was crucified, and he died alone on the cross.

In fact, one could not follow Jesus, and at the same time maintain that you’ll get everything you want. Followers left behind their possessions and families. They wandered the countryside with Jesus with little more than the sandals on their feet. Jesus was not the image of optimism and success, rather Jesus was the image of hope. There is a difference.

I found a poem that helps get at the nature of hope (Macrina Wiederkehr):

*I was just thinking  
one morning  
how much alike  
hope  
and baking powder are:  
quietly  
getting what is  
best in me  
to rise,  
awakening  
the hint of eternity  
within.  
I always think of that  
when I eat biscuits now  
and wish  
that I could be  
more faithful  
to the hint of eternity,  
the baking powder  
in me.*

Hope is like baking powder in us, that hint of eternity, getting what is best in us to rise. We all need a small dose of this ingredient, even though the stuff of hope can hardly be measured, weighed or observed. Unlike optimism, hope does not come from things, from just physical results. It comes from beyond this world and from deeply within. It springs from one’s character, from what one cares about and believes in.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions we see the clear call to work for what is good—to transform our society, to fight for justice, to resist evil, to establish fairness, equality and peace. This is the prophetic call of the Holy One—to tirelessly struggle against the darkness, against the sources of pain and destruction in our world, against hunger, war, violence, poverty, exploitation, slavery, bigotry and the like. Our work is never done.

And yet, it is also true in our tradition that in the midst of all this, God is present. In the midst of all the brokenness of the world, there is a hidden wholeness. There is an invisible kingdom with us—in the heart of every moment—that awaits our discovery, our awareness. There is a sacredness, a preciousness, a goodness and a beauty that exists independently from our efforts to bring about the good, that is there no matter what, to which we only need to awaken.

About 10 years ago, some of us went to Whiting, Indiana outside of Chicago on Lake Michigan. We were part of one demonstration among many across the world called, “Breaking Free from Fossil Fuels” to call for action to address global warming. I’ve been to quite a few protest and demonstrations in my life. And this one was pretty typical. Several hundred lively souls, young and old, from all around the midwest began with a rally and speakers, including the environmental leader, Bill McKibben. We marched with our signs by this huge refinery owned by British Petroleum with cheering and chanting. About 40 people placed themselves on the railroad tracks entering the refinery and were arrested.

And someone might look at that and say, “What did that accomplish?” There’s nothing we can really do. The situation is hopeless.” And on a certain level they are absolutely right. The power of the wealth is so strong, so entrenched. But on a different level, it was a profoundly hopeful thing to do.

Parker Palmer tells a story of talking with a friend who had worked for many years at the Catholic Worker, a ministry to the poor in New York City:

*Daily she tries to respond to waves of human misery that are as ceaseless as surf in that community. Out of my deep not-knowing I asked her how she could keep doing a work that never showed any results, a work in which the problems keep getting worse instead of better. I never forget her enigmatic answer: “The thing you don’t understand, Parker, is that just because something is impossible doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it!”*

Friends, this is the kind of hope that we celebrate today, the kind of hope that Jesus embodied. This kind of hope is not dependent upon results, but it’s connected to the unseen fruits, and to the hidden, deep, sacred reality calling the best in us to rise. This is the kind of hope that gives us courage and strength, and leads us to do impossible things.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*