

“Rejoice in Hope”

Romans 12:9-21

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The Apostle Paul invites us, urges us, to rejoice in hope. He speaks with the authority of personal experience. Paul’s hope was grounded in the Resurrection. He was an Easter guy. He kept having the kind of encounters with the Risen Christ that convinced him that a new day is always dawning, that light overcomes darkness, that sorrow surrenders to joy. Paul found that when he opened himself to the presence of Christ, to the presence of God’s love; his life took on a quality of abundance he never imagined possible. He began to understand that hope is not just a nice sounding four letter word; it is a profound force rooted in the truth that God is able to transform even the most desperate situations.

Like the Apostle Paul, our hope is grounded in the Resurrection. Like him, we, too, are Easter people. As you know, I end every one of my sermons with the words, “In the greatest of hope.” This, I do, because hope has been a sacred force in my own life. One of my greatest joys as a minister is the administration of the Sacrament of Baptism. As I sprinkle the water over each child’s head, I never know what the immediate reaction will be! One child might smile. One might cry. One might grab my eyeglasses. One might purr a quiet ‘amen.’ But, for me, in those sprinkled waters there lies the hope that faith will grow and blossom, that faith will take hold and manifest itself one day in the kind of love that Christ came to reveal.

In those waters of Baptism there is a mysterious presence of the Holy Spirit which we cannot define or even find words to describe. Yet, there is a Holy Spirit presence that nurtures hope, hope that one day this child will find and proclaim a personal faith in the Risen Christ.

For me, hope has something to do with making the discovery that God is able to use each of us in miraculous ways to usher in the day of peace. In our culture there is a nagging question we often hear. It is a question that reveals a serious doubt that God could ever use us in any way to make a transformative difference in the world. The question sounds like this: **Who me? How could God possibly use little old me to do some work of peace?** When we wrestle with that question long enough, as Jacob wrestled with the angel all night, hope is born. When we wrestle with that question long enough, we begin to see that God does have a divine purpose for each of us. Even me! Even you!

I keep thinking about Fred Rogers. Growing up in Pittsburgh, attending a Presbyterian Church, he must have wondered how God could possibly use a boy from the steel mill capital of the world. I imagine Fred Rogers wrestling with this question of purpose and being led to a television ministry like none other. A whole generation of children feel included and feel positive about themselves because Mr. Rogers made the discovery that he could plant the gift of acceptance in the hearts of children everywhere. When Fred Rogers made this discovery about how God might use him, hope was born! This is the kind of discovery that led the Apostle Paul to declare, "Rejoice in hope!"

Hope is a force that finds its way into the music we sing. Quite often now, either on the radio or on Facebook or on TV, I'll hear choirs singing that familiar Gospel hymn, "We Shall Overcome." And I find myself singing along wherever I happen to be at the time.

We'll go hand in hand, we'll go hand in hand, we'll go hand in hand some day. Oh deep in my heart, I do believe, we'll go hand in hand some day.

We are not afraid, we are not afraid, we are not afraid today. Oh deep in my heart, I do believe, we are not afraid today.

One cannot sing this hymn without feeling the force of hope Paul was talking about in his Letter to the Romans. When I sing this song, I know there is a God; I know there is a way God is using us, even now, to usher in a day of peace. When I heard it this week on a favorite CD, I was driving down route 17, and I pictured all of us forming one gigantic circle all around the church, placing a hand over our hearts, and singing loud enough to transform despair wherever it might lie. We SHALL overcome some day! Whoever wrote that song knew a whole lot about hope.

I can't preach on this topic of hope without referencing the Chipoka women. The Chipoka women have made hope as real as real can be for me. Each time I take a mission team to Malawi, I make sure they get to meet the Chipoka women. These women had reached that place of utter despair, offering their bodies for the price of a loaf of bread. Introduced to them by Mr. George Kanyemba, I began to invite South Church to make micro-loans to these women so they could start legitimate businesses. One woman used her \$50 loan to buy bricks with which she made an oven. Her scones sell like hotcakes, and her life has been transformed. She can send her children to school. One woman uses her \$50 loan to buy fish at the lakeshore and then sells them in the market. She now has iron sheets on her roof that keep out the rain. One woman used her \$50 loan to buy two goats. She has sold so many offspring that hunger no longer lingers at her doorstep. The stories go on and on.

The Holy Spirit is there in Chipoka! The Apostle Paul is rejoicing in hope. And one South Church member, who had asked, 'who me? What can I do to be an instrument of God's peace?', has discovered that a \$50 loan is like a birthstool for hope.

I tell you; hope is a force in the universe. It is a gift of God to all who are open to receiving it. And when we receive that spiritual gift, that's when we know we're living in the greatest of hope. Amen.