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A Season of Stewardship: "To Account for the Hope that Is Within You"

I. Practice Hope

1 Peter 2:4-5 and 9-10 (NRSV) 4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 5 like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 9 [For] you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

While I am usually not one to take my wisdom from bumper stickers, I will admit that one that I saw a long time ago has stayed with me ever since and in fact is the title for today's sermon as we begin our two-Sunday emphasis on stewardship towards pledging our financial support for our church's ministries in 2011. The bumper sticker was short, and it was both cryptic and to the point; it said simply "**Practice Hope.**" *Practice Hope.* The more I have thought about that little phrase over the years, the more that I think it encapsulates exactly what we Christians are called to do with our lives, our words – and our money. At the same time, and as with most bumper sticker wisdom, it also cries out for elaboration and so let us do that this morning and ask "What does it mean to practice hope in the context of our money?"

Well, first let me offer you a definition of the phrase "Practice Hope." Here goes: to "practice **hope**" is to "**decide, with audacity, to help to shrink the circle of the unpicked.**" Now, that's not what you were expecting, so let me repeat it: To practice hope is to **decide** with, **audacity**, to help **to shrink the circle of the unpicked.** Three points then: **decision**, **audaciousness**, and a phrase that no doubt needs

interpretation, **to shrink the circle of the unpicked.**

First, **decision**. Let us be reminded first of all of this important, essential truth: Hope, in the Christian tradition, is a **decision**. We need to be reminded of that just as our culture too often lies to us about what will make us truly happy, so too does that culture lie to us about what hope is. **Because hope is not simply a feeling**; it's a decision, an act of will. But you'd never know that from the ways that the word gets used all around us. For, just as with the way our culture uses the word "love," hope is often simply seen as a feeling that just somehow happens to you – or not. Or worse, that being hopeful is simply a matter of one's taste or style, rather than being a matter of conscious and repeated choice and decision and responsibility. This cultural use of the word hope reinforces the insidious idea that who we are and how we act is and ought to be dependent on our feelings of the moment.

So if we are really to "practice hope," then something more is required – and that something more is "indeed **decision**." And decision means to take personal responsibility for acting certain ways with constancy and consistency, even when it is sometimes the very last thing we may **feel** like doing. When our son Andrew was in the second grade, he came home with a report card on which he had been marked down for "Not taking responsibility for his actions." And in the conversation that followed with him, out of sheer frustration he finally blurted out "*It's not my fault that I don't take responsibility for my actions!*" Ah, but it was, it was. Just as it is our responsibility when we give in to the culture's constant invitation to not take responsibility, and to simply

and solely follow our sometimes fleeting feelings instead. So if we are to “practice hope,” we must **decide** that we will be indeed be hopeful people and that we will indeed do hope-filled things — even sometimes when we don’t feel like it.

But even that isn’t quite enough to get at what it means to “practice hope,” for there is a second characteristic of “practicing love” that is required, and that is **audaciousness**. To talk about audaciousness, let me tell a story. In 1869, John Wesley Powell led an expedition to map the Grand Canyon. At the time, it was completely unknown territory. No one knew whether the Colorado River’s half-mile drop in elevation from the mouth of the Grand Canyon at Lee’s Ferry to the exit at the Virgin River was in a series of runnable rapids or in one spectacular waterfall that would dash everyone to their deaths. Now, today thousands of people a year run the Grand Canyon in what is almost luxury — outfitters have gourmet meals prepared for each night on the river, life jacket technology makes drowning a slim possibility, and boats are designed for the very conditions they will encounter. But in 1869, there was none of that — just four mis-designed boats and two dozen men, none of whom had any river-running experience and only a few of whom could swim! The audacity of the whole enterprise is mind-boggling.

But I want to focus on just one small story from that trip. About a month or so into their journey, Powell and one of his companions decided to climb to the rim of the Grand Canyon from the sandbar where they were camped. And so they began ascending the 2000+ vertical feet. And what you may not know is that Powell had only

one arm; the other had been amputated after a terrible bullet wound in the Civil War. Having climbed *almost* to the top of the rim, Powell found himself stuck: his companion had reach the top, just a few feet above, but Powell was stuck a few feet below the rim hanging dearly onto an outcropping in a dead-end crevasse. He couldn't go up or down. He was well and truly stuck, two-thousand feet above certain death, and three feet below safety. What happened? His companion above him clad only in his by-now tattered shoes and his long johns, removed his long johns, swung them over the precipice at the same time that the one-armed Powell let go of the only grip on earth that he had in order to grab the no doubt not very savory long-johns that could pull him up, and his companion, now-naked in the desert sunshine, then indeed hauled him up higher.

I love that story. I am amazed by it. It is so fantastic, it displays such ingenuity, it shows such a knack for using the materials that are at hand to do what needs to be done. And it's so embarrassing and undignified. It is truly audacious. But the result was very, very good. We too are called to audacity. We too are called to ingenuity. We too are called to audaciously use what we have — our hearts and our minds and our passions and our creativity, our time and our talents and the contents of our wallets. We too are called to audaciously use the materials we have available and put them in service of hauling **us** higher. We are not called to be, as one preacher put it, folks who are instead “passionate about moderation.” The word we bear and the good and healing news that we know is too important to a hurting and hungry world for us to be moderate in our message. No we are called to practice hope by deciding to act with audacity indeed, using all the tools and all the materials around us to do what God calls

us to do.

But to DO what? Remember the definition I offered? To “practice hope” is to “decide, with audacity, to **help to shrink the circle of the unpicked.**” “*To shrink the circle of the unpicked.*” During the Jurassic era in which I attended Middle School, P.E. classes were a little different than they are now. I was never big on P.E. It was something to be endured. I never was very coordinated and things that came easily to others didn't come to me at all. And the thing I hated most in P.E. was when the coach would appoint two captains — and the captains were almost never the weenie guys like me but always the big macho guys who could do any sport -- and the captains would then choose up teams for whatever game we were going to play. I remember it so vividly in the way that only Middle School memories can hurt: I would stand there in the shrinking circle of the un-picked, fidgeting more and more, feeling more and more lost, helpless, and hopeless. Hoping and praying that at least I would not be the last chosen, wishing I were somewhere, anywhere else. But sometimes, miraculously, I would be picked near the first. And sometimes, even more miraculously, the coach would make me one of the captains. And then often I would try to make sure that the others who were always picked last did not have to undergo that humiliation. Now, many years later, I realize that in my choice of teammates when I was captain, I was probably spiting myself more than anything else if the point was to win the game. There was a *reason* that I and the others were usually picked last -- we were really bad!

But that is not the point. The point is the same that St. Peter's letter records so

eloquently and the call to each one of us that he makes so fervently: “*You*,” he writes, “**YOU** are God's own people,” and our **job**, therefore, he continues is “...to proclaim the mighty acts of the God who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” For “Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Once you too, you too, stood in that circle of the un-picked.

But now you don't. Instead you are here, in this place, in this community; you are have been formed and shaped by those around you who have shown you the gospel, who have picked you up when life was hard, who have believed in you when you could not believe in yourself, and who, most importantly, kept telling you, reminding you, showing you, that you too have received a promise from God and a purpose from God. And hasn't that made all the difference in your lives? Hasn't that made all the difference?

Indeed. And the way that you and I can show forth our thanks is to commit ourselves to continuing to practice the very same kind of hope that we have been shown. I believe that in our gratitude it means to care so much about those who are **not** a part of this community, who are in the words in the words of Thoreau — so much truer today than even when he wrote them — living lives of quiet desperation, who still stand in that circle of the un-picked that we will indeed “practice hope” to them. But it will take decision — sometimes we won't feel like it. And it will take audacity — it will mean that we continue to make sure that everything we do speaks not just to us who already know the tender mercies of God but to those who do not — and we must have

the audacity to put all our work and structure and values in service of that goal. That's audacious, but the occasion and the opportunity demands no less.

We are called to decision. We are called to audacity. We are called to shrink that circle of the unpicked in everything that we do. Friends, the good news this morning is that we have some wonderfully audacious dreams. We have the audacity to believe that the church is called to make a difference in a hurting world. We have the audacity to think that the message of the gospel will change lives. We have the audacity to dream of new program and new staff and missions and ministries that show that we want to continue to be a people not just interested in the difference the church makes in our own lives, but who are passionately interested in making a difference in those lives that God is leading us to, lives that we do not yet know. For what God is offering us on this and every day is indeed the opportunity to do something audacious, to do something more than we thought we could do, to do something more than we sometimes might even "feel" like doing, knowing that God has given us the opportunity to shrink that circle of the unpicked right at our doorsteps.

Next Sunday you will have the opportunity to exercise your audacity. You will have the opportunity to say "Yes, I want this to be a congregation that continues to grow in numbers and in depth, that continues to use its relationship, its building, its staff, its people to reach out in new ways." You will have the opportunity to say – to audaciously say! – that you have decided for hope: hope in what we will yet do for the circle of the unpicked at our doorsteps. So my assignment for you for this week is this: think, pray, and talk about this among yourselves, among your family. Ask yourself: *"how can I decide to be a part of the hope that is withing us, how can I decide to continue building*

on the good things that are happening here, how can I be audacious?" The opportunity is before us to decide for hope. Audaciously. May it be so. Amen.