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My Hope Is Built On....

1 Peter 3:13-16a NRSV 13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? 14 But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, 15 but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you; 16 yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

The word “hope” is at the center of those things often listed as the most important Christian virtues. In his “love chapter” to the Corinthian church, St. Paul names it, along with faith and love, as the most abiding of Christian values. And yet, it is almost such a trite word, so overused. We find ourselves “hoping” for all sorts of things: that the winter strawberries on sale at King Soopers won’t get moldy too fast, that the mail will get delivered earlier rather than later and that it will contain no bills, that (and this one I saw a lot this week on my Facebook and Twitter feeds from crazed parents) there won’t be ANOTHER school-closed snow day! And on and on and on. In this sense, you and I do a lot of “hoping” every day. And yet this can’t be the sort of thing that St. Paul was talking about when he named hope as one of those three most important virtues. And this sort of “hope” cannot be what St. Peter was talking about in today’s scripture when he tells us to always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within us.

Because, you see, if “hope” is only a synonym for “wish,” then we will find that far from being one of the three most important virtues of a Christian life, “hope” will only be one more way of keeping our fingers crossed, as it were. But you know, as far as the culture is concerned, that **is** what hope means and the culture around us tells us that these are the things to hope for, to keep our fingers crossed for – to win the lottery or to be chosen for one of those television shows that will give your house or your face or your body

or your backyard a makeover. And yet, if we only ever place our “hopes” in such things we will find that we are less and less capable of the large hope, the breathtaking hope, the truly faithful hope, that the Christian life demands. For, as one writer puts it, *“When our hope is inappropriately placed, it doesn’t matter how much I hope, that’s not going to bring me fulfillment. And I’ll be disappointed, disillusioned, and maybe even depressed.”*¹ Has that ever happened to you? You find yourself having “hoped” so much for something that even when it comes about, it doesn’t really satisfy in the way that you expected? Or you find that these sort of “hopes” simply pale in the face of life’s hurtfulness sometimes?

So let us ask, from the **Christian** perspective, what IS this hope that is so important for us to have? I want to offer what I believe two characteristics of true Christian hope, but as a way of doing so I want to talk about a great man who indeed embodied great Christian hope and a fitting man to remember as we begin our annual observance of Black History Month. Let me begin this way: For those of you over the age of thirty or so, I want you to remember back to February of 1989. The top-rated movie was “Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure.” George Bush, Sr., had been President for only a year. The tv show “Miami Vice” had its 100th episode. The first satellite in what would become the GPS system went into orbit. “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” won a Grammy for best song. The head coach of the Dallas Cowboys, Tom Landry, was fired after almost three decades of coaching the team. A computing breakthrough finally allowed hard drives larger than 528 **megabytes**. Everyone had a landline. Cell phones were the size of briefcases and terribly expensive to use. There was no internet. There was no Facebook for its inventor was only five years old at the time. It does seem so very long ago, doesn’t it?! So many changes in almost three decades.

Now, keep that sense of the sheer magnitude of 27 years in your mind and reflect on the life of Nelson Mandela. He served 27 years in a South African prison, much of it in

¹Gordon D. Venturella

solitary confinement, much of it in brutal places where he was regularly tortured, most of it while being forbidden to read newspapers or have more than a tiny handful of visitors. Imagine spending the last 27 years of your life in such a prison and you can begin to see what a miracle it is, what a manifestation of the Spirit of God, that Mandela left prison filled not with justifiable rage or bitterness or despair, but with hope. Mandela's crime was for "treason," which, in that apartheid era meant criticizing his country's heinous policies and advocating for full citizenship for black and mixed-race peoples living in South Africa. It is, however, precisely because of what Mandela did after he left his three-decade imprisonment that makes it easy for us to forget the truly brutal horrors that the South African government inflicted on such folks. If Mandela had left prison determined to turn the tables, wresting power away from the white minority and then doing to them the brutal things that had been done to his people, we would understand, wouldn't we? But then we would not know the victory, the Spirit-filled victory, that Mandela's hope for reconciliation made possible.

In 1994 this man who had been deemed a felon and a traitor was inaugurated as South Africa's president. And, much as Abraham Lincoln had done when he had spoken of "binding up the nation's wounds" following the civil war instead of punishing those who had fought against the Union, so too Nelson Mandela said this in his inaugural address, attended by one hundred thousand people, white, black, and mixed-race:

Today [we] confer glory and hope to newborn liberty. Out of the experience of an extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long must be born a society of which all humanity will be proud. Our daily deeds as ordinary South Africans must produce an actual South African reality that will reinforce humanity's belief in justice, strengthen its confidence in the nobility of the human soul and sustain all our hopes for a glorious life for all... 'We saw our country tear itself apart in terrible conflict. The time for healing of wounds has come. Never, never again will this beautiful land

experience the oppression of one by another.²

The cynics said that when the black African majority came to power, they would turn the tables and create an apartheid system against white people. But in large part due to Nelson Mandela's extraordinary actions, that was not to be. Instead he helped create a new society where wounds, indeed, were to be bound up. How and why did he do this? I think the key reason is to be found in a sentence he wrote from prison to his wife Winnie. Hear his words: "Hope is a powerful weapon and no one power on earth can deprive you of it."³ Indeed, at Mandela's death, President Obama rightly and truly said that Nelson Mandela gave him "a sense of what human beings can do when they are guided by their hopes and not by their fears."⁴

I said earlier that there were two things I wanted to say about the nature of true Christian hope – as opposed to what our culture too often calls "hope" – and both of these traits are embodied by the life of Nelson Mandela. First, like so many Christian virtues, hope is not simply about a feeling that we have, despite the fact that we use the word that way so often. No, hope – like love – is, from the Christian perspective, primarily and first of all an **action**. Now that sounds odd on the face of it, for we know what it's like to **feel** hopeful, but it's not as clear what it means to **act** hopeful. The last time I was in Las Vegas, I watched my friend Bob play at the roulette table. And I listened to those around him playing. And I kept hearing variations on a theme: "*Oh, I hope that double-zero finally hits again!*" "*I hope I still have some chips after this spin.*" "*I hope that the drink lady will come by again.*" But the difference between this sort of "hope" and what St. Paul and St. Peter are talking about is this: When you are standing there "hoping" at the roulette wheel,

²Quoted in the sermon "In Darkness, The Flame of Hope," by Rev. Dee Eisenhauer. The inspiration of using Mandela as a symbol of hope was sparked by this sermon. <http://www.eagleharborchurch.org/?p=1570>

³Eisenhauer, ibid.

⁴Eisenhauer, ibid.

you are wishing for and even working for – by putting down your chips in some sort of reasonable way – something that you **know** has at least some likelihood of happening, that stands a chance to succeed. But Christian hope is different; in fact part of the “folly of the gospel,” as Paul calls it, is precisely that we place our hope on “things that are unseen.” Hope, however, is an ability to work for something **because** it is “**good**, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.” Do you hear the difference? In other words, part of what Christian hope means is that you and I are called to work for things that we may never see, and yet which are worth working for. My favorite story that illustrates that kind of hope is driving through the hills of eastern Tennessee and seeing an old, old man out in his front yard, in front of his house – a mobile home, no less! -- planting an oak tree.⁵ An oak tree! A tree that takes decades to grow even a few feet tall, planted by one who will never be there to see it or sit in its shade but can nonetheless know its promise. And while we now know, as Paul Harvey used to say, the “rest of the story” of Nelson Mandela and the transformation of South Africa, during those long and hard and brutal years that Mandela and his compatriots were working and hoping for the abolishing of apartheid, they did not know that they would succeed. And therefore they truly acted in Christian hope.

You see, we don't hope and do hopeful things because we have a reasonable expectation that they will succeed; no, we do them because they are right and good and pleasing to God that we do them. Again, do you hear the difference? If our hopes are only placed in those things that we reasonably expect could happen, then our faith is going to be less able to deal with those times in life when our expectations are shattered and dashed. And, when that happens, we become more fearful people. For as one writer says, it is not hopelessness that is *“the opposite of hope. Fear is. Hope and fear are inseparable because any time we hope for a certain outcome, we introduce the fear that it may not happen.[And i]f we become preoccupied with the result[s] we run the danger of*

⁵Told by Richard Hamm

*living in fear... that things [won't] turn out the way we want. Fear can lead to discouragement and desertion of the cause...*⁶ And when that happens, when we become fearful, God's ability to work through us in hope to move creation towards justice and goodness and righteousness is diminished.

But how do we keep on keeping on? How do we continue to act in hope when, so often it seems sometimes, that our hopes do get dashed, and we do find ourselves fearful? Well, that leads us to the second characteristic of hope: **You cannot hope alone.** *You cannot hope alone.* That is what the church is for. Messy, imperfect, and blemished as we are, it is only through being in a community of believers, a community of prayer and mutual care, that we can find ourselves able to move from fear to hope again and again, able to indeed be angry at injustice and find the courage to confront it. Nelson Mandela did not act in hope alone. No, from his earliest days as a child in the Methodist church that taught him about God and Christ to the millions of people around the world who stood in solidarity with him, who acted to witness against apartheid, Mandela did not hope alone. In a long passage that I find very lovely, a preacher named Robert Hardies puts the point this way:

The church is the repository of human hope. ...[D]uring the Depression, my grandparents used to store what little money they could scrounge in a small purse hidden between their mattress and box spring. Forty years later, when I was young, they would often take me into their bedroom, and ... they'd slide out that same purse, and give me a \$5 bill. The church is the place where we stash away those stories of hope for when we and the world need them most. We don't create hope out of thin air, but out of the accumulated reserves that we've all tucked into the mattress over the years. We hold them here until the day when we come in despair and need to have our spirits lifted. And we make our withdrawal. ... Hope is when we sing a song that stirs our soul. Hope is when we walk into the church and we

think the minister wrote the sermon just for us. Hope is when the handshake of [the greeter] is the only human touch we experience... all week long.

Hasn't that been the case for you? Can you name a time in your life when your hopes seemed very small, when it seemed that all you did was flap your wings and nothing happened, when fear seemed to be winning? And can you name a time when bringing that to the community of the church enabled you to be re-energized, reborn even? We don't have to be perfect to do that for one another. We don't always have to agree to keep engendering hope in one another. And it is one of the best, God-given opportunities we have in this place – to be a very sign of hope, to be encouragers of one another.

You cannot hope alone. How very true. At the entrance to a hotel swimming pool on the French Riviera there is a sign, badly translated into English, that says this: *"Swimming is forbidden in the absence of a saviour."*⁷ Well, I assume that the translator was reaching for the word "lifeguard," but nonetheless the sign is a truthful one. For when you and I are swimming in the sometimes troubled waters of our lives, we indeed need a savior Who is always there, patiently, gently, but oh-so-persistently lifting us up, undergirding us, calling us forward, and whose love in the face of our imperfections is perfect and who has promised – through whatever comes our way – to be with us and to be the reason that we can hope and continue to hope. Aren't you glad for that?

⁷<http://www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/a-le01sesm.php>