

From Suffering to Hope

Romans 5:1-5; 8:24-25; 12:12; 15:13 Jeremiah 29:11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
June 18, 2023

Let's talk about hope: what hope is and what hope can do for us. So, let me begin by asking, **do you consider yourself to be a hopeful person?** I'm not asking at this point what you hope for, but rather are you generally hopeful? I know, for instance, that we all hoped that electric power and internet service would be restored ASAP after the terrible windstorm we had a week ago last Saturday and had to cancel last Sunday's service of worship. I know that those of you who actually lost power, and suffered while waiting day after day were doing the most hoping.

On a more general level, it's often difficult to be hopeful these days for a myriad of reasons, especially when looking at the current state of politics, economic disparity, inequality, gun violence, injustice, widespread mental health concerns, and even disputes and splits within organized religion.

Almost ironically, **it is people (most likely including yourself) with deep compassion and empathy for the woundedness of others and of the world, those who have proximity to pain because of their compassion, that most often pay a higher personal price because of their level of caring about others and the current state of things. That, in itself, can lead to a form of suffering and grief.** Chronic grief is often not addressed or dealt with in the first place.

As most of you are aware, part of my recent sabbatical was spent at a weekend retreat with **John Pavlovitz**, entitled, "Cultivating Hope in Difficult Times: Avoiding Compassion Fatigue." How timely! How providential! John spoke on how cruelty is trending and how it's taking a serious toll on us personally and as a society. Or in his words, **"It's exhausting to give a damn."** And John asked the small group of just 20 of us in that retreat: **Who is paying the price for your empathy**, or lack thereof when exhausted? He rightly reflected upon how we must protect our own well-being, because unlike God we do not have limitless and unbounded compassion. Therefore, **we need self-care – compassion for ourselves – perhaps even a time to step away for a bit to regain our empathy and hope.**

I want to ask you today a couple of questions John asked us to seriously reflect upon. And I'll give you a moment after each for you to reflect upon now.

- **When and where do you feel most hopeful?**
- **When and where do you feel most hopeless?**

Though a bit personal, I'll share what I wrote down in my journal at the time, what popped into my mind at that moment.

- I feel most hopeful when I witness people experiencing joy, and when they feel free to be who they are created to be.
- I feel most hopeless when I see the attacks on our democracy in the unjust limiting of freedoms, and when I witness absolutism combined with judgment and condemnation.

Quite a mix and interweaving of current politics and religion. So, let's wonder together: **Where does hope come from? How can we become a more hopeful attitude?** Not surprisingly, the scriptures have a lot to say about hope, so let's look at one particular example. The apostle Paul, who knows a lot about suffering, and I suppose compassion fatigue, tells us in his letter to the Romans that suffering leads to endurance, endurance develops character, and character results in hope.

Suffering→ endurance→ character→ hope. It's almost like a mathematical equation. If A leads to B, which leads to C, which leads to D, then contrary to what might seem logical, **suffering may indeed, in part, end up resulting in being hopeful**, in having something to hope for. Does that make sense? This is the story line in countless movies and novels. It's a theme also found in many stories from the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament – some stories being over 3000 years old.

The apostle Paul, like in the times of the ancient Hebrews, lived in a shame-based culture. Suffering and hardship were often considered shameful because many believed that it was somehow related to judgement and punishment by God. Unfortunately, many people still believe that today. Paul, however, asserts the opposite. For instance, I don't believe God was involved in picking and choosing who lost power, and trees, in that storm, and who didn't. Nor, when certain people found the electric power restored quickly while others didn't.

So, in the first chapter of Romans, he begins with such a claim, "I am not ashamed." Not only is Paul not ashamed, Paul also sees value in and through hardship and struggle. The greatest benefit, which would not be immediately obvious to his readers, or to us, is that **our suffering can indeed lead to our ability to persevere, which can lead to our growth in character and ultimately to a spirit of hope.**

Whatever the circumstances, **Paul looks to the future without despair or hopelessness**, even in the worst crises, like when he himself is beaten and thrown into prison. **Where does that hope come from? Paul teaches, in part, it is found in our trust and confidence in God, that God's Sacred Presence is always with us and for us.** Yet, even the peace that comes with that will assurance of God's grace does not exempt anyone from suffering in life. The world is filled with suffering, that is just part of the human condition. It is how we respond to that suffering, our own as well as others, that matters and makes all the difference.

Let me make an important distinction at this point. **Hope is not just optimism for a better tomorrow**, though that I part of it. The optimist looks for circumstances to improve, and there's nothing wrong with that. Hope, on the other hand, is a bit different. **Hope does not depend on the ups and downs that cycle through our lives.** Old Testament scholar and Presbyterian seminary professor **Walter Brueggemann** views hope as trust in what God has done and will do, in spite of evidence to the contrary. In his 2018 book, **A Gospel of Hope**, he writes:

Hope in gospel faith is not just a vague feeling that things will work out, for it is evident that things will not just work out. Rather, **hope is the conviction, against a great deal of data, that God is tenacious and persistent in overcoming the deathliness of the world, that God intends joy and peace.**

Christians find compelling evidence, in the story of Jesus, that Jesus, with great persistence and great vulnerability, everywhere he went, turned the enmity of society toward a new possibility, turned the sadness of the world toward joy, introduced a new regime where the dead are raised, the lost are found, and the displaced are brought home again.

This is reflected in **Jeremiah's** prophesy to the Jews in Babylonian captivity and exile, that **God has plans not to harm, but plans to give you hope and a future.** That's a Bible verse worth remembering.

In an article entitled, "Outrageous Hope" by **Gary A. Wilburn**, posted to the progressivechristianity.org website back in 2009 (April 28), he writes this about hope.

Having hope doesn't change anything, it makes US want to change it... Just saying, "I hope things work out for you" is a cop-out. Nothing is going to work out in the future without someone doing something different, something better, in the present.

Martin Luther King, Jr. lived that dream: "We must accept finite disappointment," he said, "but we must never lose infinite hope... **If you lose hope, somehow you lose the vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all.**

Two years before **Bobby Kennedy's** assassination, he spoke to thousands of students at the University of Cape Town in South Africa:

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, that person sends forth **a tiny ripple of hope**, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, **those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistances.**

Hope, then, like love, is a verb. It is what gives us the courage and energy, fueled by our compassion, to actually do something to bring change and challenge the hierarchical status quo of the privileged structures of power.

However, since those are such big-ticket items, like fighting systemic injustice in any form, like racism, sexism, genderism, homophobia, poverty, homelessness, and the like, John Pavlovitz offered this helpful advice. While continuing to keep hope alive by working for the change in all of those massive systemic issues, **don't forget to also spread hope by keeping it small, close, here, now, and doable.** You and I, and we together, can encourage hope through simple acts of compassion no matter how small, close by, here and now, and importantly, doable.

We can hope in God and rejoice in God's Sacred Presence even when our many wishes and dreams in life are not realized, and when we are not very happy with the current circumstances of our life. For remember, **God suffers with us, with all who suffer.** Suffering→ endurance→ character→ hope.

We are called to be people of hope. And as a community of faith, we can help and be present for each other, especially when we suffer – offering our acts of compassion, our empathy, our ripples of hope.

Amen.

Resources:

John Pavlovitz, "Cultivating Hope in Difficult Times: Avoiding Compassion Fatigue", retreat at The Art of Living Center in Boone, NC, May 5-7, 2023.

Walter Brueggemann, *A Gospel of Hope*, compiled by Richard Floyd (Westminster John Knox Press: 2018), 104–105.

Gary A. Wilburn, "Outrageous Hope", April 28, 2009, progressivechristianity.org.