

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OPTIMISM AND HOPE

Matthew 25:31-46, Colossians 1:1-20

November 26, 2017, Christ the King Sunday

First Presbyterian Church

Theme: We dare to hope because a loving God reigns over the universe.

Illuminate this, your ancient word read, with the light of your Holy Spirit. Pry open our minds and hearts with your truth embedded in Scripture. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Colossians 1:1-20 (RSV)

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colos'sae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,

4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints,

5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel **6** which has come to you,

as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth,

7 as you learned it from Ep'aphras our beloved fellow servant.

He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf

8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

9 And so, from the day we heard of it,

we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

10 to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

11 May you be strengthened with all power,

according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy,

12 giving thanks to the Father,

who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

13 He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,

14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation;

16 for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities--all things were created through him and for him.

17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

18 He is the head of the body, the church;

he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead,
that in everything he might be pre-eminent.
19 For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell,
20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Sermon

No doubt we've all had friends or relatives or co-workers who we would describe as "glass-half-full" people. Regardless of the challenges and troubles they may have seen in their lives... through lost jobs or serious illness or a teenager who gave them a run for their money, they're always "chipper" and "upbeat". They are those whom Tennyson describes as ever cleaving "to the sunnier side of doubt"... *always* in a good mood.... always positive... always "optimistic" about the future. OR... OR could it be they're just "hopeful" - because optimism and hope are related, but are not quite the same thing.

Most days I like being around "glass-half-full" people. I'm a relatively serious guy... like my Dad, I'm more of a "realist" than an "optimist"... and in most cases, I prefer to expect the worst and then be surprised when things turn out good. So I like positive, upbeat people... optimistic folks are good for me.

But I know they can also be exhausting, at least in large doses. I know that unending optimism can wear thin and sometimes can seem completely out of touch with reality. I wonder sometimes how some folks can always be so "up" when life can be so tough?

Well, maybe that's just how some people are wired - maybe some folks are just born optimistic. Or maybe it's deeper than that. Maybe they're *hopeful* more than they are *optimistic*. Because as I said, optimism and hope are related, but they're not quite the same thing.

Here's the difference. Optimism is inside of *me*; it rises up from *within me*. It's an attitude toward life that comes naturally to *me*, or if not that, it's an attitude that *I* choose to have and *I* work to keep every single day. But wherever it comes from, optimism is *internal*... it's a *personal* disposition... part of *my* make-up. The problem is that if it's something that's just "in me," it can fade away... it can be lost. Or to use another image, if it's simply something like fuel that *I* have in *my* tank, I can eventually run out of it.

Hope, on the other hand, is grounded in something *outside* of me. It's not a mere disposition or attitude I have; it's rooted in a reality *beyond* me. I might say I'm an optimist by nature... that's just how *I* am built. But, on the other hand, I could say that I am full of hope because there is good reason for hope *out there* - a reason that is beyond *me* and any native "chipper-ness" inside *me*.

Well, in our passage from the Letter to the Colossians, Paul tells the church that he's heard about their faith. And then... in verse 5... he adds that he's heard about their *hope*... a hope that he says is "laid up for you in heaven." In other words, their hope is not merely *in them*; it is laid up

for them in heaven... so it's more than optimism because it's based in something transcendent something beyond them... in Paul's words, something "laid up... in heaven."

Then in the second part of passage, Paul points to the actual source of this hope. He says the reason they can hope is that they have been "rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son." And then, in words that soon morph into a stunning hymn of praise, Paul says that the One who has rescued them from the power of darkness, namely Jesus Christ, is "the image of the invisible God," "in (whom) all things hold together," "the beginning," "the firstborn of the dead," "first place in everything."

This is theological poetry, my friends... we should ask the choir to sing it rather than have me speak it. But sung or spoken, all its rhetorical energy is aimed at the same target. The target is a core truth of the faith: the trust that – believe it or not – a loving God reigns supreme in the universe. That despite all evidence to the contrary, a loving God reigns supreme in the universe... and this truth, Paul says, has been made real to us in Jesus Christ. In his cross and resurrection, good won the defining battle with evil, love won the contest with hate, life triumphed over death. So that the last words of life and history shall be "truth" and "love" and "life," *not* "lie" and "hate" and "death."

This core affirmation of the Christian faith means that life really does have meaning and purpose. It means that this life is more than a sorry series of random passions and fears and events. The promise of the Gospel - the promise celebrated on this Christ the King Sunday – is that even though it's not obvious much of the time – the God of love rules the universe. And because of this, those Colossians – and you and I – can dare to hope... not merely to be optimistic... but to *hope*.¹

Until Harry Potter came along, the best-selling book in the English language (beside the Bible) was John Bunyan's classic 17th Century allegorical novel, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The book uses a "journey" as a metaphor for life... and the chief character, named Christian, is the archetype of a person struggling to be faithful throughout his life journey. The very last scene finds Christian coming to the end of his symbolic travels. His journey has taken him through many hardships with such emblematic names as the "Hill of Difficulty," and the "Valley of the Shadow of Death." Christian also faces temptations... most famously when he attends the "Vanity Fair."

Well, on the last leg of his journey he is required to cross a great and fearsome river. Christian is afraid... but together with his friend named Hopeful, the two of them wade into the rushing waters. Christian began to sink in deep Waters; the Billows go over his head... the waves go over him... he cries out and Hopeful, who is just ahead of him, replies to his cry of fear with what may be the most hope-filled words in all of his literature; "Be of good cheer, my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good..." It is Bunyan's whisper of hope to all who read his story: "Be of good cheer, my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good..."²

¹ Michael Lindvall in a sermon preached at Brick Presbyterian Church, November 24, 2013.

² Long, Thomas G., *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, WJK Press, 2009, p. 122

I think I may have told you before about Rabbi Hugo Gryn who rose to be one of the most prominent Jewish thinkers in post-war Britain. "When he was a boy, he and his family were imprisoned at Auschwitz... Hugo's father insisted they observe every Sabbath... and to the day he died, Hugo remembered when to observe the Sabbath, his father took a piece of string and put it in a bit of butter and lit it to make a *shabbat* candle. Hugo was furious and protested, 'Father, that is all the butter we have!' His father said, '*Son, without food we can live for weeks, but we cannot live for a minute without hope.*'"³

Most of you probably heard that Della Reese died last week at age 86. After a prolific career as a gospel-influenced R&B performer ... a TV guest star, talk show fixture, and opera singer... her husband released a statement through her *Touched by an Angel* costar Roma Downey, saying that Reese "has passed away peacefully at her California home surrounded by love." Downey added, "I know heaven has a brand new angel this day."

Did you know Della Reese was on *The Ed Sullivan Show* 18 times in one year? Or that she was the first African American woman to "guest host" Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*? It was on the set of that show in 1979 that she suffered a brain aneurysm – during which she had a near-death experience – that inspired her to become an ordained minister and to start a new church. Yet, her signature television role came late in life as she starred with Roma Downey in the spiritual drama *Touched by an Angel*. The show was a huge hit... and ran for nine years telling stories of God's impact in everyday life. This week I heard an archived interview with Della Reese on the radio – she was talking about the success of *Touched by an Angel* – and with that deep and dignified voice... the voice not only of an actor but a pastor, she said, "People need something to help them with their lives. In the show, we didn't tell you what to do, we said, 'did you ever think about it like this?'"⁴

This day - Christ the King Sunday - we make especially sure to think about it like this - to lift up the core truth of the faith: the trust that – believe it or not – a loving God reigns supreme in the universe. That despite all evidence to the contrary, a loving God reigns supreme in the universe... and that this truth has been made real to us in Jesus Christ. In his cross and resurrection, Good... won the defining battle with evil, love... won the contest with hate, life... triumphed over death. The defining victory was won on Calvary's hill and the ultimate victory is guaranteed. The God of love rules the universe! And because of this you and I can dare to HOPE... not merely to be optimistic... but to *hope*. *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Charge

This core affirmation of the Christian faith means that life really does have meaning and purpose. It means that this life is more than a sorry series of random passions and fears. And it means that we have something to do! Augustine said: "Hope has two lovely daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the way things are but ought not be, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are." Hope is anything but some passive, vague, wimpy, wispy, cross-your-fingers kind of thing. It is a mighty force that empowers people to make this life better.

³ 2 Long, Thomas G., *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, WJK Press, 2009, p. 132

⁴ Eric Deggens reporting on NPR's *All Things Considered*, November 20, 2017.

Jesus taught that the residents of heaven will be those who did something - fed the hungry, cared for the sick, welcomed strangers, clothed the needy, visited prisoners, gave cold water to the parched. Hope moves us to get up and get busy doing something helpful.⁵

⁵ Wayne R. Willis in *Hope's Daughters: A Helping a Day of Wisdom and Hope* (Resource Publications-2014).