

June 3, 2007
Proverbs 8:1-11, Romans 5:1-5
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

“Hope Unvanquished”

Some weeks ago, I shared with you the story of Alex and Ginger Evans, a husband and wife team who serve as the pastor and Christian educator of the Blacksburg Presbyterian Church near the campus of Virginia Tech University. Alex and Ginger Evans, along with members of their church family, have worked tirelessly for healing and hope after the violence and massacre at Virginia Tech.

In a recent article in “The Presbyterian Outlook,” Alex and Ginger Evans tell the story of what has sustained them through this terrible ordeal. They write, “In the midst of our heartache and loss, we have been absolutely overwhelmed too with a new sense of church.” Each day they have received notes, e-mails, telephone calls, visits and support from Presbyterian Churches all over the country and from the PCUSA Disaster Assistance team. They have been encouraged by the prayers and support from Presbyterians all over the country. These expressions of care have transcended theological viewpoints and divisions. They write, “Ours is a wonderful church - local and global...Isn’t this the kind of life and community that Jesus teaches - compassion and prayer, care and support, encouragement and peace?...We have a very great church, with an important calling to be Christ’s light, hope, peace and love in the face of all things.” (*A New Sense of Church*, “The Presbyterian Outlook,” May 27, 2007, p. 16).

In their words, I hear echoes of Paul’s words to the Romans about what it means to be the body of Christ. It is to have peace with God through God’s grace which we receive in faith. The peace we know is not based on what we have done or what we could do; it is based on what God has done for us. God’s peace replaces our relentless striving for approval. God’s peace takes away our insecurity and our anxiety. God peace fills us with hope not only for the future, but also for this present time in which we live.

Paul’s words remind us of how much we live by hope. Or, as Alex and Ginger Evans write, “We have a great church with an important calling to be Christ’s light, hope, peace and love in the face of all things.” I do not believe that anyone could face the terrible tragedies of this world and the personal tragedies of our lives with any measure of hope without the peace that comes from God. We live by hope. We live in the power of hope. Hope is not something that we add on at the end of things when everything else is in place. Hope is not the whipped cream and cherry that top off an ice cream sundae. Hope is the foundation, the source and the energy within all of our striving.

Forty years ago, the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote a book entitled *Theology of Hope*, that turned our thinking about hope upside down. In most traditional theology, hope was seen as something to be presented and explained at the end of church theology and church creeds. Theologians and preachers turned to the topic of hope when the time came to discuss death, resurrection and the return of Christ at the end of history. What Moltmann helped us see is that, as Christians, we look at the present from the perspective of the future. All Christian thinking begins with our confident hope in the great things that God is doing and in the glorious future that God has prepared for us and for all creation in Jesus Christ. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have a foretaste of the future. We look for signs of God’s future in the present. In Christ, we can even see our own suffering and the suffering of the world perspective of God’s future. Because we hope for what we do not yet see, we live by hope in sometimes hopeless situations. Moltmann writes:

“It [hope] pronounces the poor blessed, receives the weary and the heavy laden, the humbled and the wronged, the hungry and the dying, because it perceives the Parousia [the coming] of the kingdom for them... In the promises of God, it [hope] can see a future also for the transient, the dying and the dead. That is why it can be said that living without hope is like no longer living. Hell is hopelessness, and it is not for nothing that at the entrance of Dante’s hell there stand the words, ‘Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.’” (p.32)

We live by hope. This is the gospel truth. The voice of wisdom says, in Proverbs, this truth is clear and plain and worth more than silver and gold.

Hope is as essential to life as the air we breathe and the water we drink. This past week a group of young adults in the church was sharing lines of poetry that had stayed with them through the years. One member of the group brought to mind the words of Emily Dickinson comparing hope to a bird that dwells in the soul.

“Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune -- without the words, And never stops at all, And sweetest in the gale is heard; And sore
must be the storm That could abash the little bird That kept so many warm.
I’ve heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.”

Emily Dickinson knew that hope sings sweetest in the worst storms, the chilliest times and the strangest places. It is the nature of hope to grow strongest in times of greatest adversity. This is why Paul is so bold as to say that suffering does not destroy our hope, but gives birth to greater hope. He writes, “...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.”

There is so much within us and around us that would threaten our lives and destroy our hope. Some people here today face health problems that severely limit their activities and explode their dreams for life; others are dealing with troubling relationships; still others are having a hard time finding meaningful work. When we look at the larger world, many of us are terrified by the violence in our society, troubled by the decay of moral values, frightened by the evidence of global warming, distressed about war, terrorism and hunger. We have every reason not to hope except for one: the future belongs to God.

When we know the future, we can live in hope. We remember our calling “to be Christ’s light, hope, peace and love in the face of all things.” This week twenty-one of our high school graduating seniors and six adult leaders will be leaving on the Footsteps of Faith trip to Greece, Turkey and Italy. They will walk in the footsteps of Paul and the early apostles who lived their lives as witnesses for Jesus Christ. These apostles lived their lives in the power of hope. As graduating seniors participate in this spiritual pilgrimage, they will have opportunities to reflect on how they will live their own lives as people of hope. This summer there will be six mission trips - two adult, two senior high, one middle school and one college trip. As the participants go to Chicago, Kenya and Mexico, they go as people filled with hope. This morning we will ordain and install ten new elders in our church. I pray that they will lead us in being a people who bear the hope of Jesus Christ to the world.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr captured the essence of our hope when he wrote:

“Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love.” (*Justice and Mercy*, p. v.).

We comfort one another with the hope we have in Christ; we offer others a second chance and a fresh start because we hope in the future God has planned for them. We teach children to read; we visit the sick and the lonely; we work for justice and peace; we feed the hungry and build ramps for the homebound because, even when we cannot see the final outcome of our labors, we believe they make a difference.

As a people of hope, we see the world, not as it is, but as God intends it to be.