

October 21, 2007
Jeremiah 33:10, 11; Romans 8:18-25
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“The Future Before Us”

Dr. Tony Compolo tells of a conversation he had many years ago with his friend, Millard Fuller. Fuller called him to be on the board of a new organization he was starting...Fuller said,

“I want you to be on a board.”

I asked, “For what?”

He said, “We’re going to build houses for poor people.”

I said, “That’s good.”

He said, “Not only are we going to build houses for poor people, but they are going to be able to buy these houses with no down payment.”

I said, “That’s terrific! That’s what usually keeps poor people from buying houses.”

He said, “Beyond that, they are going to have long term mortgages and no interest on the mortgages.”

I said, “That’s wild! I’m buying a house and most of what I pay in any given payment is for interest.”

And he said, “That’s right. But the Hebrew Bible says that you should never charge interest to poor people, so we’re not going to do that. One thing more, when these poor people buy these houses they are only going to have to pay for the cost of building materials.”

I said, “Millard, that’s wonderful except for one thing, who’s going to pay for the labor, who’s going to pay for the workers?”

He said, “No problem! I’m going to get church people to volunteer.”

I said, “Right!” (Tony Compolo, sermon preached on February 10, 2002, “Being Upbeat in a Downbeat World.”)

Yet, it happened! Millard Fuller was able to get people of faith to envision a future with people of faith working together to build affordable housing for the working poor. In thirty years, Habitat for Humanity has built more than 225,000 houses, enabling more than 1,000,000 people to live in safe and affordable homes. Habitat doesn’t just build houses; Habitat builds hope.

In Jeremiah’s Jerusalem, the future could not be bleaker. The Babylonian army is laying siege to the city. The soldiers defending the city are systematically dismantling the houses to use the stone and timbers to reinforce the city walls against the siege. Even the king’s palace is not spared. Jeremiah is under arrest, because he has spoken judgment about the inevitable collapse of the city and the exile of the royal court and the people. The king holds him in the guard house of the palace to silence his prophecies. How can you defend a city when the prophet says the defense is futile? Every resource of the city is being used to repel the invading army - every resource but one. There is one resource that will survive the destruction of the city. There is one resource that will go with the people into exile in Babylon. One resource will lead them home: hope.

Time and again, people have emerged from shelters after wars, fires, bombings, terrorist attacks, hurricanes and other disasters to survey the fractured landscape in utter shock and disbelief. Just this week, a small Indiana community experienced the devastation of a tornado that damaged hundreds of homes and buildings. On a more individual level, many among us have emerged from a hospital room, an accident scene, a police station or a broken marriage in a state of despair, wondering how we will find a way to go on after an overwhelming loss or tragedy. Everything can change in a second. As Dr. R.E. Clements has written, “In disaster the first casualty is often the will to survive.” (Jeremiah Commentary, Interpretation, p. 199) Hope dies within us. Without hope we cannot find our way forward.

Paul knows how much the people of God are suffering and will suffer for the sake of the gospel. Paul is no stranger to dis-

appointment, abuse and hardship. He knows that his fellow believers will come to share the same kind of suffering he has experienced. In II Corinthians, Paul tells how he endured beatings, imprisonment, shipwreck, hunger, thirst, sleeplessness and betrayal for the sake of the gospel. He pours his life into spreading the gospel and establishing churches across the Empire. These little communities, these outposts of faith, are fraught with conflict, challenges and difficulties. If you were placing a bet on their survival, based on the appearance of things, it would be a long shot at best.

In spite of the obvious frustrations and disappointments, Paul says, "I consider the sufferings of this present time not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." Is Paul just whistling in the dark? Is Paul some kind of first century Pollyanna? Is there any foundation to what he says?

Paul's hope is rooted in the plan and providence of God. Paul steps back from the fray to see the hand of God at work in the life of each person and in the whole of creation. Like Moses, Paul has been to the mountain; he is peering into the future. Paul sees how Jesus has set us free from our captivity to sin and death. We are waiting for the final fulfillment of the work Jesus has begun in us. Paul knows that the Holy Spirit is at work in us transforming us, changing us and leading us to our future as God's children. Although we cannot see or even imagine how or when it will be, we know that God will reveal our destiny as God's children. No matter what happens to us in this life or what happens to those whom we love, God's plan for us cannot be defeated. Therefore, Paul can say at the end of the 8th chapter of Romans, "nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (8:39)

God's plan is even bigger than our own individual salvation. God has a plan for the redemption of the whole creation. Just as we have been set free from our bondage to decay, the whole creation will also be set at liberty. We are a part of the whole. We are vitally connected to the animals and the land, to the sky and the trees and to the oceans and the stars, both in our fallen nature and in our redemption. All around us we see the devastation of nature, the decay of our cities, the brokenness of culture and the destruction of war. When it looks as if everything is winding down and falling apart, the Holy Spirit is working within the created order so that it, too, will be transformed into a new creation. Some of the pains we experience in our own lives and the shattering we witness in creation are a part of the birth pains of a new age. In the midst of suffering, we hope for what we do not yet see.

From prison, Jeremiah speaks a word of hope to the people of Jerusalem. He does not try to pull the wool over their eyes by telling them that the city will not fall or the exile will not happen. He does not deny the seriousness of the situation. He holds fast to the truth that, beyond the trouble, there will be a new beginning. He believes in the future God has planned for Jerusalem. One day, the deserted streets of Jerusalem will be filled with the sounds of people telling stories, buying and selling their wares, laughing and rejoicing in the goodness of life. The day will come when people will again be married in Jerusalem and the people will gather in worship to proclaim the goodness and steadfast love of the Lord. The ordinary interactions and experiences of life can be a sign of hope. Isn't it strange that God chooses a man in prison to speak the word of hope? Hope arises for Jeremiah and for Paul out of the strange mix of suffering and faith. This hope sees them through the suffering and brings them to glory.

Hope is essential to life. Some years ago, my family and I visited the Imperial War Museum in London, England. One of the exhibits was a simulation of a World War II London air raid. We entered a darkened space that was like a bomb shelter in the London Underground. The lights went out. We began to hear the voices of the people of London gathered with us in that shelter. We heard voices wondering where the rest of a family might be, voices trying to comfort children and babies, voices concerned about their sons off at war, voices making jokes to mask the fear and voices of outrage at the Nazis. When the room stopped shaking, the dust settled and the smoke cleared. We came up out of the shelter to see a simulation of the London skyline with many buildings on fire. On the horizon was the untouched white dome of St. Paul's cathedral. The unvanquished dome became a sign of hope to the war-weary people of London.

God has put the church in the world to be a sign of hope. Every time we worship together, we proclaim our hope. We celebrate the goodness of God in the face of those who live as if there is no God beyond their own selfish desires; we give thanks for the wonder of human life in the face of those who try to rob life of its mystery by treating others as objects to

use or abuse; we delight in the beauty of creation in the face of those who treat the earth and its resources with contempt. Whenever we baptize a child, we dare to say in a world that allows millions of children to starve to death, that every child born into this world is a beloved child of God. When we break bread and drink wine together, we anticipate the day when we shall share the abundance of the earth in peace. When we gather to bear witness to the resurrection, we profess our faith that death is not the end of life. We believe that we have a future with God.

The future before us is filled with the promises of God. We are to live in the world as a sign of hope. We take our cues, not from what is, but from what is coming to be. This weekend, over forty men from different backgrounds, races and religious experiences are engaged in a Great Banquet retreat here in our church. During the retreat these men are supported by people who embody, in their care and conversation, the love of Christ. The weekend is about the awakening of hope in human life. In a few weeks, a group from our church will return to coastal Mississippi to work on a house for a family made homeless by Hurricane Katrina. Two years after this disaster, hope is still a rare commodity. Hammers, saws and demonstrations of compassion will speak the language of hope.

On this Commitment Sunday, we are committing ourselves to God's future for the church and the world. We are committing ourselves to live in the world as a people of hope. The challenge before us is clear. We have a unique opportunity to strengthen our witness by increasing our support of key local and global mission projects from our inner city and to Africa. As you have heard, 100% of the increase in total pledges and gifts for 2008 will be devoted to mission and benevolences. A special gift to the endowment will cover all of the other increased program and operational costs for next year. God has given us a future filled with hope and promise.

There are always some who say the future looks bleak. Certainly there is plenty of evidence around to draw a dark picture. The Scriptures say that in spite of the sufferings around us and within us, the future is in the hands of the God who restores life and transforms creation. God invites us into a glorious future by living today as a people of hope.