

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Hope As A Verb”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, July 19, 2020

Romans 8:12-25

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Will you pray with me? Holy God. We come. We worship. We listen. We wrestle with your word for us this day. So, even though we are apart from one another, we are bound by your spirit, and may we sense that community as we wrestle with the word this day. Amen.

Last week, the spirit led me into preaching about hope in the midst of this pandemic time, and it had come to me that the reality is we are going to be grieving the loss of one way we had been living our everyday lives. Hope is that which helps us to find our way into a different future. So, imagine my surprise when I looked back at the sermon summary that I do for Bill so he can pick music that connects to the theme for the day. I realized that, back then, I had said I was going to preach on hope. The question for me was do I do this again or move in a new direction? But, as the spirit would have it, a member sent me an email that inspired me to consider another aspect of hope. Leigh Mansfield had written in her email that last week's sermon brought to mind something she had heard recently. She said, "I heard two experts talking about climate change and related issues, and the dire situation we are in. And the word hope came up in the conversation. And one of the speakers said she did not like the word hope because hope sounded so passive. And they both agreed because they felt that the word hope meant not doing something, just thinking something. And they feel, understandably so, that we need action." And Leigh said to me, "I think I know where the climate woman was coming from, but there's another side of the word hope, especially in these times. So that gave me a lot to think about, in terms of what is hope as a part of our faith and what does it mean to us?" And her words gave me a lot to think about, too.

Now, we know hope in our faith is important. Paul says, "Faith, hope, love abide, and the greatest of these is love." But the question is, "Is hope a passive thing or an active thing, or is it both?" And, as I thought about this, what came to mind is how we, in English, view the word meaning hope-- faith, I mean. And you have heard me say, on more than one occasion, that the word faith in Greek is *pisteuo*, but we, in English, tend to use it as a noun. In Greek, it is a verb. So, faith is an action. A way of seeing the world. A way of being in the world. And maybe we should see hope in the same way. Remembering that hope is both a noun and a verb. A way of living in the world. It's not something passive. True hope should be something that inspires us to act or to change the things that concern us. And it was also interesting to me, as I re-read this passage, that Paul not only talks about hope, he also speaks of the whole creation groaning. That a new creation is trying to birth forth. And that imagery was so important to Paul because he felt something very different had happened and was happening. That would change the whole world. For him, it was the radical event of the resurrection of Jesus. Now, we know Paul's expectation was that Jesus' return would be imminent. He imagined it literally in terms of the importance of the resurrection and the gift of new life that's offered to everyone. And indeed, there was a profound change in that moment in time because 2,000 years later we're still talking about Paul's words. But I found myself thinking it is also literally true in these days for our whole creation is indeed groaning. It's a time of massive upheaval and great change from climate issues to pandemic and economic issues to the issues of equality for all. We're living in the midst of all of this trying to make sense and figure out how to live into the future with it.

I think the climate scientist is right. We should not only hope something will happen in the passive sense. We need to do something more. We need to believe that change can happen, and we need to help make it happen. And what came to mind is the difference between wishful thinking and action of hope. Hope should not be seen as wishful thinking. Hope is more than that. For hope in terms of faith is a willingness to bring about change. So, I went to the Greek Linear Bible which I go to pretty often. It's a website that takes all the passages of the Bible and puts the words in Hebrew or Greek underneath it. They analyze each word in context and as it appears in other places in the Bible and hoping this passage in Greek in Romans is expressed as **[foreign]**. I found that indeed hope is considered in Greek both a noun and a verb and it has to do with expectation. If you really expect something to happen, you cannot be uninvolved in making it happen. But we also know that something new cannot fully happen unless our hearts and minds are open to change. And I realize in times such as these it's easy to feel overwhelmed by everything going on. Pulled in so many directions we wonder if we can make a difference, but I feel that's the very danger. If we become too focused on the forest, we don't see the trees right in front of us. If we allow ourselves to become overwhelmed we become stuck and we can't move and we think why bother? Nothing can be done. It's important to remember that this is not true. That was clear to Paul. He was open to that. And it's true for us now. Those in healthcare are open to change. Scientists are working night and day for a vaccine and I have no doubt their work will make a difference, not only for the vaccine but they will discover other things along the way. Over these months, healthcare workers have listened and become aware of new information gathered. Some are experimenting with having people lie on their stomachs to keep pressure off their lungs. Certain medications such as Remdesivir are being used to help with recovery, others are being given blood thinners because clotting issues have been known to come up. And while it appears that immunity may not be long-lasting, the antibodies created by those who have just recovered can be harvested and help those who are ill in the present overcome more serious symptoms. Science is acting and moving, trying and experimenting. Research opens doors in new ways. Ideas from the past are being tried now because of the urgency of the situation. And so, there's an openness to trying new things, albeit carefully and wisely.

We have found out, too, that the Earth has been eased of some of its literal groaning. While monsoons are horrific in India, flooding and fires have been record-breaking in some of our states. Yet we are seeing the effect of the slowdown of activity. It shows us that short-term changes can make a big impact. If porpoises are in the canals of Venice, something is changing. In Thailand, elephants are on the move over roads. Endangered turtles are reproducing in abundance. Buffaloes are gathering on now quiet beaches. And more birds are being seen and heard. I consider these things to be signs of hope. So, while we are in the midst of difficult times as a planet, we are also witnessing how change of the movement of people can create quick and

obvious results. And maybe that will inspire us to think of other ways, and be more open to other ways, of bringing healing to the Earth.

So rather than looking at all these issues as a mountain too high to be climbed, let us seek out what we can do, each of us, to make a difference and try some new things. Because what each of us does can matter and make a difference. While those of us at risk should not go out, we can write letters to our representatives and send checks to organizations helping people in need and we can pray. That is not passive work. It's active work. Others of us may march and we have witnessed marches taking place everywhere, all over the world. And I sense a deeper urgency about the issue of equality and justice deeper than I've seen in a long time. And while I realize we have a long way to go, it's important we not get stuck in thinking that an issue is too big. Because this issue is too important to be put off or ignored.

We're aware that many of our brothers and sisters have been impacted by the pandemic through the access to food. Those who have lost jobs in the food service industry, though, have now been hired to work in restaurants; while closed to the public, they are making meals for people who go hungry. I talked this week to a fellow Boston University graduate, who's working at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Dorchester, Mass. They are serving 1,000 meals a week to the hungry in their neighborhood. And school cancellations have inspired drive-through restaurants to provide food for children no longer receiving meals at school. And then there's Austin Perine, the young boy I shared with you about a couple of years ago when Austin learned that people were going hungry in his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, even though he was only four years old, he used his allowance to buy food from Burger King and dressed in his Superman outfit, would hand out sandwiches and drinks in parks and other places to homeless people. He gave them a meal, a hug if they wanted it, and said, "Don't forget to show the love." Encouraging them to pay it forward. And over the last two years, Austin has done more and more. Steve Harvey and LeBron James have reached out. Austin and Harvey donated more than \$5000 to feed the hungry. LeBron James wrote, "When it gets tough, you keep fighting. When it seems that no one else cares, you keep caring." And Austin's actions have rippled out. He's been speaking at schools and other places, on television, and invited to help feed the homeless in cities such as San Juan, Puerto Rico, Washington DC, and Seattle, Washington. Austin is a child of hope and a child of many talents. He has written and performed two songs, one about staying home and staying safe, and the other on the pandemic. And he shares words of hope for the future. He yearns for people to be fed, a vaccine to be discovered, and generally wishes peace for all. One website called Planet Hopeful, interestingly enough, wrote about the impact he is having in bringing hope. One can see when you watch him, that his very presence, his kind words, his hugs bring light back into the eyes of those who he feeds and touches. I have no doubt we will hear from Austin in the years to come. His goal is to become president and make sure everyone's fed. His ambitions are lofty, but if anyone can do it, it's Austin. He truly is a superhero to me, because he not only serves, he collaborates, he prays and he inspires hope in others, he is hope in action.

As I thought about Austin, I thought about the ways in which he lives out my favorite question aboard the nation for deacons, elders and pastors in our denomination. The question is. "will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?" I think each of these words is a reflection of an aspect of hope, and Austin shows all four in what he does. Energy is the willingness to devote the movement of oneself to doing something. Intelligence is a reminder that we as human beings have a unique ability to research, gather information, and act in response to what we've learned. Imagination is the ability to think above and beyond what we already know or have assumed, to consider new ways of doing things in the world. Imagination is trusting we can make a difference if we act. Thus, imagination is also an act of creativity. And then there is love. Paul says the greatest gift of faith--love, informs all else of how we do and act in the world. Hope and love I think, are intertwined because they push us to see new possibilities, reconciliation, and community. They are acts of connection and new life. Hope is an investment in the future. It is the belief that things hoped for should not only include change, but also include actions. It is the awareness that faith and our relationship with God and one another is not something we're just supposed to talk about, but it's how we're called to live, and serve, and move, and have our being.

As it says in Hebrew, now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. May we do more than wishful thinking in these challenging times. May we act, trusting in the spirit, we can do more than about wishing for something to happen. We can do things that will make a difference in this world that is surely groaning. We can be those who live out our faith with hope and love and bring about Shalom. Blessed peace to one another and the world. Amen.