

Lent V, April 2, 2017

Holy Spirit Parish, Cumming, GA

Life is complicated.

We face challenges of some type every day—some big and devastating and some small and annoying. Most somewhere in between. We also experience great joy, sharing love and pleasure, and making lasting memories with friends and family. And honestly, there is much of life that is just one darn thing after another. As Eliot said in his great poem, “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.”

So in the midst of this complicated life of challenges, joy, and humdrumness, how do we survive? Rather, how do we flourish, not just as individuals but as a community of faith? The answer is hope. Not vague optimism, but a sincere conviction that life has meaning deeper than our worst experience, higher than our greatest joy, and brighter than the perpetual dusk of our daily rut. Hope.

We find that pattern, that hint of hope in the Scripture readings for this fifth Sunday of Lent.

The mysterious reading from Ezekiel describes the bones of the dead of a defeated nation being joined together and then brought back to life by the Spirit of God. Hope is offered to a people who feel lost and abandoned by God.

The psalm expresses the cry of a person who is lost. He knows he needs to reconnect to God—reconnect to hope. And he does that by slowing down and really seeing his life and the world he is part of. As he slows down, he finds hope hidden in the world that God loves.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he writes a remarkable thing-- that the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead inspires us in our daily living. If we really believe this, the Spirit provides hope for any struggle we may face.

And the Gospel today is often used to give hope at a funeral. The story tells us that there is hope for us beyond the grave. In fact, hope embodied in Jesus walks right up to the grave and calls us out so that we can see the world differently and live differently.

What gives us hope today? If we did a survey, I believe we would get many answers. Some would be very thoughtful, perhaps based on lived faith or loving relationships. Some would be vaguer, perhaps based on a sunny outlook on life (not a bad thing). Some of us would not have an idea. In fact, the lack of hope is one of the key issues in our lives today.

We see the lack of hope in one of the growing problems in our country—opioid addiction. Perhaps you have read or heard about it in the news. Perhaps someone in your circle

has become entrapped in this addiction. Perhaps some of us here are addicted but so far able to hide it from others or at least manage it.

There are a combination of reason for this social phenomena. The drugs involved are cheaper and more available than when most of us were growing up. Some fall into addiction as part of recovery from some type of injury. Some experiment from curiosity and then find they have been captured by the power of the drug. But one of the main causes for the spread of opioid addiction is the lack of hope.

People feel lost, like the man in the psalm for today. They have lost something or someone-- a job, a spouse, a sense of community, or a sense of purpose in their lives. They have lost an identity that held them together. The pain of that loss becomes too much and they want it to go away. And the drugs available today can make that happen, at least for a time. But drugs only treat symptoms of the soul.

It is not only the addicted who have lost hope. There are other ways it can be expressed in our lives:

When we look to political or religious leaders for answers and then find out that they are as lost as we are—maybe more. The problem then becomes that we give up on religion or politics and then fall deeper into despair.

We pursue travel and entertainment to distract us and bring fulfillment to us. After we go to the show or the distant land, we come back home and realize that there is something still missing inside of us. Perhaps expressed as a question, “Is this all there is?”

We seek joy in a relationship and then time does what time does—the relationship is ended. There are limits to even the best of human relationships. But when that happens, it may make us hesitate to try again.

So it is important for us to find hope that endures. Looking for it in the wrong places can harm us. Giving up on hope, though, can make us lose the zest for living that makes life worthwhile. Hope is the one thing we cannot lose.

There are three things that can help us to grow in hope as people of faith. One is a negative—something to stop; and two are positive—things we must do.

First the negative: STOP KEEPING SCORE.

Especially, stop keeping score related to our expectations of results and timing of when things should happen. This applies to our own lives and to the people we love. Keeping score sets us up to lose hope. What does keeping score sound like? “I will get this new position—it is my dream job!” ... “I want to get married by thirty, thirty-five at the latest.” ... “My child has to get in that school—it will determine what happens for the rest of his life.” You get the gist. It is not whether we “win” or “lose;” it is how we keep score.

Many of us have been trained to keep score, so it is hard to stop. And having some goals that we track can help us to be healthy, happy, and responsible adults. The difference is when keeping score becomes the measure for whether we are happy or not. When we fall short, we can give up and lose hope. And when that happens, we can become stuck in a dark place.

Instead of keeping score, we can practice two simple things that help us to keep hope. The first one you can probably guess based on what I have said many times before: PRAY. And I do not mean pray that you get what you want so you have a good score. Actually, pray in totally different way. Pray according to our Episcopal tradition with its simplicity, self-discipline, and sense of community.

First, choose a time of day that works for you—morning, when things are still quiet; mid-day, taking a break from the busyness of life; evening, before we eat dinner; or nighttime, before going to bed. The time can vary based on your schedule for the day; or you can actually set aside a time to pray more than once a day. But to begin with, choose a set time.

Prayer is about more than giving God our list of things for God to do (see, “Stop keeping score”). Prayer is about connecting with God so that God helps us to grow in grace. That connection with God and growth in grace over time is what gives us real hope. We can see real change in us and how we relate to others so we can begin to relax and be less concerned with keeping score.

In our tradition, we pray with the Scripture. Read from the Psalms (some psalms are assigned daily in *The Book of Common Prayer*). Read from the three other portions of Scripture assigned daily. If you have to choose just one, read from the Gospels. Then say the prayers that have been prayed by millions over many centuries-- from the Lord’s Prayer to the collects of the church. Prayer is about us learning who God is and who we are called to be if we believe in God. We can pray from the heart for ourselves and for others—that is always good to do. And it also helps if our hearts are shaped over time by being connected to God.

The third thing you can probably guess as well. Be in relationship with people. Your spouse and children if you have them. Prioritize loving and listening to the people closest to you. And connect with them without keeping score. If you learn your son is dropping out of college to travel the world (for example) be okay with that. Try to understand and appreciate the adventurous spirit that has inspired him. Do not keep score for him.

Draw your circle wider, too. Be in relationship with neighbors, co-workers, and even people outside of your social circle. Go to The Place, for example, and hang out; not to “do charity,” but to build relationships with people who are different from you in some ways—but the same as you in other ways. Be curious and kind and—DO NOT KEEP SCORE.

If we are able to give up scorekeeping and practice regular prayer and deeper, truer relationships, over time something will change in us. We will find something growing in us that we only dreamed of before: Hope. It will be a different type of hope that is not dependent on

things going well for us. A hope that flows from God's Spirit within us and our faith in God growing and deepening. It is a glorious place that can help us to endure even when our scorekeeping hopes are dashed. I recommend it.

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. (E. Dickinson)