

1 Peter 1: 3-9 “The Inheritance of Hope” Rev. Janet Chapman 4/19/20

Every year about this time in Redding, antique and collectible cars begin to show up from all over the country in anticipation of our Cool April Nights event. Although they will be noticeably absent this year, I share this story in honor of folks like Steve & Randy Hamp who do such an amazing job at fixing up their cars for show and bring a smile to all of us. It seems that one couple had installed a fancy horn system in their classic 1964 Pontiac GTO that played a variety of tunes. They enjoyed attending car shows where they could not only display their shiny red GTO but could also alternate horn music depending on the mood. While at one such show, they received the sad news that their rich grandma had died and they needed to leave right away. Several days later, their GTO was one of many classy family cars slowly driving through town in the funeral procession towards the gravesite. As they carefully pulled into the cemetery, the driver accidentally hit the horn which proceeded to get stuck as he and his spouse struggled to disable it. Yet that wasn't the worst part as everyone turned to glare at them - the horn was belting out “We're in the Money.”

In 30 years of ministry, I have seen quite a bit of glaring between family members over money and property after a loved one has died. The death of a loved one is a crisis which, not unlike this historical time, can bring out the good as well as bad in folks. People in grief are often raw, traumatized, and unfiltered, and when you add inheritance-related matters into the mix, things often get messy. I can imagine most of you have heard of, or even experienced, a skirmish between family members over an inheritance. In my family, it was between an aunt and uncle over my grandpa's fishing boat – not much to speak of, certainly not a yacht, but to them, you would think it was made of gold. We don't have to go far in the Bible to find

inheritance squabbles where Jacob steals Esau's birthright and blessing from father Isaac. The Bible makes more than 250 references to inheritance, a clear sign that everyday conversations about legacy took place in ancient life as well.

Peter Marty notes it is hard to pin down the motivations which center around an impending inheritance – is it the monetary value as we sing, “We’re in the money,” or is it the emotional and sentimental tie to the prior generation which I believe was tied to that old fishing boat, or is it some romantic hope that a new possession will open a door to the “privileged life”? Who knows what the controversial hotel magnate Leona Helmsley was thinking when she left her Maltese dog \$12 million in her will? That is a lot of doggie bones. The motivations behind inheritances are certainly not reserved to the wealthy either, as reflected within Boston’s Holocaust Monument. A sculpture bears the inscription of a concentration camp survivor which says, “Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present it to me that night on a leaf. Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you given it to your friend.” Imagine giving a single raspberry to your best friend before being shuffled off to the gas chamber.

However, one thing is common among all the earthly things ever passed down from generation to generation – they all lack permanence. Regardless of the estimated worth of an earthly inheritance, it will always wither and fade, like the grass and flowers of which the prophet Isaiah once spoke. Even a precious raspberry given with the generosity of an entire life behind it is temporal. In contrast, our scripture today from 1 Peter speaks of believers being gifted an inheritance that is “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading;” it does not wither or fade,

its value transcends earthly wealth. Fred Craddock lends his insights to the text by stating that today's text is a reading of the will for all God's people. It is the reason we gather to worship every Sunday or whenever you happen to take time for God – we gather to read the will. Wherever we are – at home around our computer, in front of our TV, reading this news which arrived in our mailbox, we read the will. It is part of the worship of God, to read God's will so that all the children of God can know what their inheritance is. In this little church being addressed by First Peter, everybody comes to hear the will being read: strangers, exiles, nobodies, slaves, gay and trans, women and men in this virtual space, all excited to hear what will be read. Their excitement overflows for they have heard the rumors. This will has been kept guarded in heaven, under lock and key, and nobody can change this will. Its value will not diminish, it is imperishable and unchangeable. It is not based on the whims of the one who wrote it who can change it over and over depending on whether the beneficiaries deserve it or not. The will is not based on what you wear to the reading or what horrible thing you have done or what your station in life is or what nation you are from. So these people gather to hear the reading of the will and they are confident that they are going to be taken by the hand and allowed to walk in the inheritance of being children of God, they will be allowed to run through the unsearchable riches of God's love and grace. Every one of them is expecting it.

The leader gets up and reads the will. "First, there is no silver or gold here. You have come to the wrong place if that is what you are interested in. We are the church and there is no silver or gold here. There is, however, boundless mercy, and when push comes to shove, that is the part of the inheritance that every one of us will want more than anything else: the boundless mercy of God, not what we deserve, but what love gives....There is hope, and that is

what keeps us alive.” Indeed, hope is what keeps us alive in this pandemic, it is what keeps the isolated, the parent and child, the jobless and the overworked alive. It is what keeps the farmers alive as they mow through their crops, burning fuel they bought on credit, destroying their crops because there is no one to buy them. “Well, maybe next year.” Hope, not because it is spring and everything is blooming, but hope that is built on the nature of God who calls into being what does not exist and gives life even to the dead. That is the basis of real hope.

Martha Phillips, Ebola and now COVID19 nurse, knows that kind of hope. At 35 years old, she fought on the front lines in Sierra Leone against Ebola, even as her plastic face guard came loose in the presence of an infected patient. She stayed calm and quickly left the room, holding onto hope that she hadn't been infected. She explains that nothing compared to the crisis she and others experienced as they were inundated with a massive influx of terribly sick, infectious, and distraught patients. Until now, as she serves in an ER in Bellingham, Washington. She is not surprised that the novel coronavirus came to the US, but the failure to protect health-care workers has stunned her. Phillips explains that she had better personal protective gear in West Africa by a long shot, but now is having to make equipment like N95 masks last longer as her hospital tries to conserve supplies. When she read the CDC strategies put out in mid-March concerning personal protective equipment recommending that if nothing else, nurses should wear a bandana or scarf and use garbage bags with holes cut out for the arms, she knew then that they were on their own. Morale among health professionals sunk as the decision not to transition many key national warehouses into protective equipment manufacturers spoke volumes. So Phillips and others began to turn to each other, lean upon one another, encourage one another. Signs of support from everyday folks began to show up,

people scrambled to share whatever they could to protect the workers, sometimes it worked and sometimes not, but very slowly the curve of rising deaths began to flatten. Now that Washington is in a better health position, Phillips transferred to New York and continues the struggle. Even with the awareness of how vulnerable she is to catching the virus and the gruesome knowledge of what her death would look like if she succumbed, she continues on. It appears to me that she does so because of hope, that endless, persistent hope that defies all logic or rationale that says this patient, this child of God entrusted to Martha's care, may be the one to recover, to live. Hope is that precious inheritance which is being realized as the boundless mercy of God works within Martha. It is not based on what anyone deserves, but it is what love gives. Because of what God did in Christ, all of us have been handed down a living hope which is more precious than gold and becomes the salve, the literal healing, of our souls. This, my dear friends, concludes the reading of the will and if you listen carefully, you too will hear your name called.