

## Hope Against Hope

Each called position Presbyterian pastors are required to present to the Presbytery their statement of faith. On the floor of the Presbytery, in front of potential collogues and chosen elders this document is presented, and the candidate is examined. Mostly, this is an act of theater. Questions are often planted by the committee and people are encouraged to behave.

Unfortunately, for some of us, this has not been the case. My record is over an hour on the floor of the Presbytery answering questions that seemed somewhat hostile. Such was the life of a clergy that was known for organizing others for social justice.

It was most often this statement of faith that was the central element of intense questioning.

Every time it has been the same. I have agonized over my Statement of Faith, thinking I made it milk toast enough for the most ardent critique, and find that it wouldn't matter. It is always on things that shock me.

Here are some things that have been the focus of hard questions:

The blood of Jesus Christ, how I can believe in general revelation, If I am an activist how can I say that I am ecumenical, and why I had an insufficient theology of the afterlife. The truth is that even though these have been unpleasant experiences, they have often helped me to understand myself. I do not obfuscate my beliefs for anyone, they are mine. If they make people uncomfortable or angry that is their problem not mine.

That final one was the most baffling to me, the afterlife. The questioner was clearly angry with me because the afterlife was not included in my statement of faith. Their anger increased by my answers.

I indicated truthfully that there is scant evidence of an afterlife in the Biblical texts (the Hebrews didn't really have that concept in their faith). What is there is often in formats that is less explanatory than used. Paradise and hell are not central understandings of why people should follow Jesus Christ. So, I focus on this moment as the most important part of the beginning of eternal life promised us. I retain hope in something beyond this mortal coil, but it is a mystery to me because I have not experienced the final death (and in our faith resurrection).

This was not the answer he wanted to hear. He literally was red faced and unable to keep his anger at bay. I finally asked, "If I had certainty would that be better than hope?"

To my shock he answered "yes". I think exposed more of a shortcoming in his faith than mine.

The prophets, Jesus, Moses, David, Peter, the author of Hebrews and Paul are steeped in the notion that at the center of our freedom in Jesus Christ is this radical notion of hope.

Paul today states the absurd nature of our faith. He states: 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.

The author of the book of Hebrews puts it this way. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

What are some strange things we can hope? These are some of mine.

That at least here all will be one in Christ. That this pandemic will end sooner rather than later and the anger that many of us feel quelling in society will be dealt with. That those who perpetuate domestic violence will be turned away from that violence. That those who advocate for violence will find peace. That war will end. That cancer will be a word from our past. That Black lives matter equally to everyone else in our society, immigrants and refugees find that they are respected in our borders, women are given equal status as Paul points out, no one goes to bed hungry, widows and orphans have their loneliness or abandonment healed, that there will be a resurrection when we throw off this mortal coil, that there is a God, that that God hears our entreaties for the salvation of all humanity. That I we are being reconciled with people of different denominations. That we do not abandon those whose ideology is ugly to us, that we believe that they can be transformed by the renewing of their minds (otherwise what hope do we have in our own ugliness?). That those who have been convicted of serious crimes can be redeemed and transform their lives. That those who care more about this country and politics than their faith will see the state is temporary and Christ is eternal. That those who hate us or revile us would have those opinions softened, just as we should have those opinions of others loosened.

But if I honest about what I retain even the simplest hope it is often very personal. I have hope that someday I will fully accept myself for who I am. That I might feel that I can be accepted by a loving God. That I know that other's love me and do not wish me harm. That I can trust some people. That I can change.

Hope is aspirational. It may make us uncomfortable and challenge us more than certainty. Hope does not let me be quiet to the activist that only wants to be against something and does not offer something to be

for. It pushes me not to be comfortable in a faith built around the nostalgia in yesterday. It challenges me to look beyond what I can see with my eyes, what I have been taught by parent or culture, what may seem etiquette in good company to the spiritual realm of what could be, what God expects from us as humans.

To me that is the only type of faith worth having. The embarrassing, illogical, and unpopular assurance given to me by hope. You may not see what you hope in, but with faith, we can be a part of its fruition in this world. Thanks be to God.