

June 10, 2018 - Annunciation Episcopal Church - 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

"So we do not lose heart."
2 Corinthians 4:16

One night in 1985, Anthony Ray Hinton was at his job, cleaning floors, at a supermarket warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. He was in a locked, secured facility, overseen by guards who signed everyone in and out. At the same time, 15 miles away, the manager of a restaurant was abducted, robbed, and shot by a single gunman, whom the manager later mis-identified as Ray Hinton. Although there was ample evidence to prove that Hinton was innocent, that he couldn't have been the gunman, he was nevertheless convicted of this crime and two other similar, unsolved murders. Inadequate and incompetent legal representation played a big role. Mr. Hinton was sentenced to death row, where he remained for nearly 30 years.

Eventually, Hinton secured new legal representation, and after more than 14 years of litigation and a unanimous ruling on his case by the U.S. Supreme Court, he was set free in 2015, exonerated, found entirely innocent of the crimes for which he'd been convicted.

In the forward of a book Hinton recently released, Hinton's lead attorney writes about the death row prisoner's attitude during the long time he was incarcerated. The attorney says, "Mr. Hinton was sustained during his long years on Alabama's death row by a childhood friend who never failed to visit him over the course of nearly thirty years. Lester Bailey insisted that Mr. Hinton never feel alone or abandoned. Mr. Hinton learned to engage those around him and create an identity on death row unlike anything I've ever seen. Not only did he shape the lives of dozens of other death row prisoners but also those of correctional officers who sought Mr. Hinton's advice and counsel on everything from marriage and faith to the struggles of day-to-day life."

The attorney describes his visits to the prison, when guards and other prison workers would pull him aside to ask how they could help Hinton and his case; they wanted to help because of how much he meant to them, how generous he was with them. The attorney closes his forward in the book this way, "(Hinton's) story is one of forgiveness, friendship, and triumph. It is situated amid racism, poverty, and an unreliable criminal justice system. Mr. Hinton presents the narrative of a condemned man shaped by a painful and torturous journey around the gates of death, who nonetheless remains hopeful, forgiving, and faithful."

Hinton, Anthony Ray; Hardin, Lara Love (2018-03-27). The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row (Oprah's Book Club Summer 2018 Selection) (Kindle Locations 66-71, and 90-92). St. Martin's Press. Kindle Edition.

Nearly thirty years on death row, knowing that you're completely innocent: Ray Hinton had every reason to give in to what seemed insurmountable odds against him. But, for whatever reason, he didn't. He remained "hopeful, forgiving, and faithful" - he did not, in the words of St. Paul, lose heart.

This past Thursday, at Reggie Collymore's funeral, we read this same passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. In my sermon, I talked about how Reggie lived his life and faced his death confident in the promises of God: a God of faithfulness, mercy, and generosity, who is present in what is seen and what is unseen. Reggie, too, did not lose heart.

But I want to talk now about those who *do* lose heart. Those who - whether they are people of faith or not - do not see any hope in the next moment, or who are suffering such misery that they conclude that ending their life is their only or best choice. This week, the news was full of the

stories of the deaths by suicide of designer, Kate Spade, and the chef and author, Anthony Bourdain.

Because I follow food far more than fashion, I'm more familiar with Mr. Bourdain than Ms. Spade. I've read his books and followed his travel and food shows. By his own admission, he considered himself a good but not outstanding chef. But he had an appreciation of and a deep knowledge of food and cultures. He was a beautiful writer, and a colorful storyteller. When he visited other countries, he didn't usually seek out the fancy white tablecloth places with multiple Michelin stars, but the food carts parked on the street and the grandmas cooking in back rooms. He wanted to know the people, understand them through their food. Hear their stories while breaking bread with them. He came across as irreverent, and funny, with what many would consider to be a dream life: family, friends, interesting work, money. Flying all over the world to meet new people and explore new places. And yet. Apparently, he lost heart. As did Ms. Spade, and the estimated 45,000 people in the U.S. who die each year by their own hand.

The sociologist, Brene Brown, published an article on her website Friday, reflecting on these two prominent deaths, along with the thousands

that never make the front page. Here's part of what she wrote, "The news of these deaths is a cruel reminder about the realities of depression and anxiety, and about the dangerous stories that we make up about those "successful" people who don't know anything about pain and never need help. I say dangerous because they're never true.

Everyone has a story or a struggle that will break your heart. And, if we're really paying attention, most people have a story that will bring us to our knees.

You would think the universal nature of struggle would make it easier for all of us to ask for help, but in a culture of scarcity and perfectionism, there can still be so much shame around reaching out, especially if we're not raised to understand the irreducible nature of human need.

We can encourage our children to ask for help; however, if they don't see us reaching out for support and modeling that behavior, they will instead attach value to never needing help.

We also send strong messages to the people around us, including our children, friends, and employees, when they ask for help, and in return,

we treat them differently — as if they are now less reliable, competent, or productive.

And, when we respond to a tragedy like this one with unfounded comments and criticism about how someone who most of us didn't know at all managed her (or his) struggle, her meds, (his) work, her family — whatever the focus — we help create that culture where it feels like help-seeking just opens us up to more pain and judgment. I think we do this because we want to believe that if you do everything you're supposed to do, this will never happen. Just like cancer, it unfortunately doesn't work that way.

To say that suicide is selfish is not only wrong — it's ironically and sadly incredibly self-protective. It's as if you're raising your hand and saying, "Although I didn't know you and I clearly do not understand clinical depression and suicide, I'm going to continue judging people who die from it even if it causes unimaginable pain and trauma to the survivors and further stigmatizes mental illness because it makes me feel better than, safer, and more comfortable."

<https://brenebrown.com/blog/2018/06/07/everyone-has-a-story/>

To know pain is human. To need is human. And, no amount of money, influence, resources, or sheer determination will change our physical, emotional, and spiritual dependence on others.

Many of us are willing to extend a helping hand, but we're very reluctant to reach out for help when we need it ourselves. It's as if we've divided the world into "those who offer help" and "those who need help." The truth is that we are both. Need is the most beautiful compact between humans."

So, let us pray that we do not lose heart. And let us pray that we are receptive to those who have lost the will to pray that prayer for themselves, and who may reach out to us for help. Let us pray, also, for anyone who feels themselves losing heart, losing hope that God's presence and promises are meant for them, pray that they will entrust their fear to someone, and do the asking, the reaching out.

My former Chicago clergy colleague, Matt Gunter, who now serves as bishop of Fond du Lac, put it this way:

May you receive the grace to know and feel in the deep places of your spirit that you are created in the image of God. You are, therefore, a being of indescribable beauty and infinite value. You are a subject of God's sheer delight.

*Despite how you might feel,
despite what you might think,
despite what you have done,
despite what has been done to you or left undone,
despite what has been said to you or about you;
you are cherished.*

God, who knows you intimately, desires goodness for you and desires to forgive, heal, liberate, and transform you.

And there are others who desire goodness for you.

Reach out to them.

“Everyone has a story or a struggle that will break your heart. And, if we’re really paying attention, most people have a story that will bring us to our knees.” Even in the face of that reality, we pray that we don’t lose heart. And we pray and give thanks for the lives of those who have lost heart, and hold fast to the hope that they will find heart again, resting in the loving presence of God in the life that is to come. *Amen.*