

## *“The Hope that Does Not Disappoint”*

Romans 5:1-8

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June 14, 2020

After taking time to count them, more than 15 people used the word “hope” this week to describe how they were feeling. For some it was the hope that some good news brought into their lives, for others the hope of Northern Virginia entering into Phase 2 of reopening and the return of movement and connection, for some young people it was the hope that comes after finishing something hard, as online public school ended this week. But for most it was a hope that the focus on racial injustice, anti-racism and moves towards equity for African Americans was bearing fruit across aspects of American life and culture. Nascar banning the Confederate Flag being one example of a shift that makes a strong anti-racist statement.

So I have been thinking a lot about hope this week, a word mentioned three times in the first five verses of our scripture. For a pastoral care class in seminary I read a 300 plus page book on... hope called *Images of Hope, Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* written by William F. Lynch, a Jesuit Priest. The book included three guiding frameworks for hope, that may seem rather obvious. First, What I hope for, I do not yet have. Second: It may be difficult, very difficult and long. Third: But I can have it.

Lynch describes hopelessness as found in two poles of thinking – one is in an unfocused hope, that branches in all directions like a futile optimism of positive thinking in all things. He calls this a “romantic vision of hope.” The other is to hope for the outright impossible, while leaving room for miracles of God he worries that hope cannot stand long under the burden of that which cannot be – maybe expect in the kingdom of God. I connect his idea to the beautiful Joan Didion memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, where after the sudden death of her husband she needed a year to convince her brain that she couldn't undo his death by reconsidering the choices she made leading up to it. That was a hope that was just not to be, but one we can relate to, in our own stories of grief.

Hope offers transcendence of the present, “freedom from the prison of the instant” imagination for a future good, guided by the Holy Spirit. Hope can imagine a not yet seen way or way out of difficulty, a wider perspective for life and thought. When we look at the Romans 5 from this framework of hope: First, What I hope for, I do not yet have. Second: It may be difficult, very difficult and long. Third: But I, or a group I am part of, can have it. It gets pretty interesting to consider what Paul or as Paul writes to the church in Rome, the Christian community, maybe Christians in general, doesn't have but he imagines having in the future.

The first five verses are two long sentences that center around hope. The first is a theological review of God's work through Jesus Christ –

we are justified by faith,  
have peace with God through Jesus,  
access to the grace in which we stand,  
and we can be confident – more what Paul means by boasting – in our  
hope of sharing in the glory of God.

This is a theme that Paul returns to in Romans 8, that the glory of God is a future hope, for our eternal life with God, but that it is also a revealing now, that God's children are not called to stay the same. N.T. Wright says (*New Interpreter's Bible, section on Romans*), "God's glorious presence, at work already in the hearts of believers, will one day flood their whole being." Hope for the drips and streams of God's glorious presence to become floods that will, in Romans 8, liberate creation from its bondage to decay. Paul sees the children of God as bringing freedom, and the hope in Romans is that they will be both the workers and the vessels for it.

And that gets to the second part of hope, that what we hope for is often only seen after work that is hard and long, which brings us to the second sentence. It is either a flow chart from left to right, suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, or it is a series of blocks building to hope. Suffering, endurance, character, hope.

One leads to the other, or each one grows out of the other but the beginning is the same – suffering, and so is the end – hope. The professor Willie James Jennings wrote about suffering: "God will not now, or ever, withhold the divine life from our suffering. Suffering becomes the place where God is working out flourishing life for us." (*Christian Century Article, 8/26/2017*) That sounds like hope. And this hope, not optimism unrelated to hard circumstances and realities, but through those circumstances and realities, does not disappoint, can be counted on, is another place where we stand, because God's love is poured out into our hearts. I picture this pouring like another flood, that flows into us, and then through.

Here is the hope to be found: God has begun a work in us, and we are in God's process. The rest of Romans 5:1-8 makes this clear, God took the time to send Jesus to die for us, so God will keep doing the work that was begun at such a cost. (idea from NT. Wright's commentary) That is hope because we aren't yet what we will be, the road can be hard and long, but God has already seen how far we travel down it, we can get there.

The book on hope ended with a discussion of this premise: Everyone is hoping for something better for themselves and for the world. Our role was to help them imagine it, to imagine it with them. Rob Bell, the preacher and writer, says that Despair is believing that tomorrow will be exactly the same as today. That could be part of what's been hard in Covid-19 months. So today, I ask you to consider what it is you hope for. To rely on the words of scripture from Paul, That we hope in our future glory with Jesus, and our present growth in the Lord that finds a way to hope through, not around, what is hard. And to consider that what God floods your heart with, what love is poured out there is to be for the healing of the world.

I have so many hopes this week related to racial justice and anti-racism: I read a poster that said that “All Mothers were summoned when George Floyd called for his Momma” and I have thought about it every day for 10 days, usually in a puddle of tears. So I think God wants me to start there, because there is love to be poured out, and hope that God’s power is always at work for healing the world. One place of hope last week, the kind of hope that begins with struggle, was a Langley High School parent town hall responding to students who used racial slurs in a group chat, which someone took a screen shot of and then spread so far that the Langley twitter account had to be closed for 24 hours as people demanded a response from the school.

Which they then did, holding a town hall first for students, then for parents. 11 students spoke and each one would have broken your heart, as they shared the constancy of negative words and stereotypes sent their way, often as a “joke” but not always, and the pressure these students of color felt to take it as a joke, lest they be cast out from their peers for being too “serious” or too “sensitive”. One of the things that caused me to feel some shame was that I was really surprised by the prevalence, because if I have been listening these past two weeks, and I am trying, then I shouldn’t have been. So maybe it is not surprised, but challenged by this being our McLean community where my child attends school, but that challenge turns to hope that people are listening in a new way. To a one, on the parent forum they pleaded for us to do better with our kids. Each one said please tell your children that racist jokes and slurs are not acceptable. They put the challenge out there because they have hope that we can do better.

The writer Austin Channing Brown talks about how whenever someone in the public is called out for this, a celebrity, they turn to the “relational defense.” (podcast with Brene Brown) If you knew the people who really know me, my black friends, you would know that I am a good person. Hope is to be found in confession, and not falling into the shame shields (in this passage, the word for the hope that does not disappoint is in the Greek, hope that will not make me ashamed.) The shame shields Brene Brown identifies (can be found lots of places by googling, also in her book *Dare to Lead*) come into play when I have wronged someone, and it threatens my sense of who I am, my perception of my value system, I most likely will do one of three things:

1. attack them to defend my sense of self as a good person,
2. walk away from them and sever the relationship – avoidance or denial
3. or move towards them and force them to take care of me and make my feelings better.

We in the church can be leaders in putting down shields and confessing when we have sinned, especially when we have sinned in matters of race. I am reading a book by Jia Tolentino called *Trick Mirror, Reflections on Self Delusion*, and I just read this line, I have always accommodated everything I wish I were opposed to.” The conversations in our country allow me to hope that through the grace of God, I might be a little less accommodating, a little more able to oppose the racism that breaks God’s heart.

Everyone is hoping for something better for themselves and for the world. What is it that you are hoping for? What you don't have, but you can imagine, even if the work in between is hard and long. In this view of hope as care, our professor told us that hope begins with imagination, moves to feeling, and then flows out from our hands as we work towards it. And that hopes are strongest in community, when we hold them together. How might the hope of the glory of God, in the present, and in things to come, and hope that is through suffering, endurance and arises from character, sustained by God's love and the Holy Spirit, given to us, Connect with your hopes for yourself, those you love, this church, this community, our country and our world?