

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY

First Sunday After Pentecost - June 6, 2004

Theme for May: Everyday Spirituality

Anne G. Cohen

Romans 5:1-5

For Our Reflection:

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.

- Emily Dickenson (1830-86) Poems

Hope is not a feeling. Hope is a decision.

- - Jim Wallis, Catholic Worker

Hope is a Choice

We boast in our sufferings knowing that

Suffering produces endurance

Endurance produces character

Character produces hope

And hope does not disappoint us because

God's love is poured into our hearts... (Rom. 5)

I have spent much of my adult life trying to figure out what the heck this means. My Dad used to tell his children that going through difficult events or making hard decisions, sacrificing or just plain suffering at any level – was good for our character. When I finally read this passage in Romans I realized why he thought building character was such a good thing. Character produces HOPE – or it's supposed to.

It took me much longer to understand that one does not just become hopeful because one has an interesting personality. One becomes CAPABLE of producing HOPE through the sheer willpower of a STRONG character –

Well, willpower and a little brain chemistry adjustment for some of us – which allows one to actually FEEL the endorphinic effects of exerting oneself and producing the aforementioned HOPE.

Viktor Frankl, doctor, author and well-known Holocaust survivor, had a theory about why some people survived and endured in the concentration camps of World War II – and why others gave up and perished quickly. Frankl survived Auschwitz by setting three goals for himself: 1. survive; 2. use his medical skills; and 3. try to learn something.

In his book MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING he describes a pattern among survivors. They all believed that they had something significant yet to do in their future. This allowed them to rise above the suffering of the moment, to produce hope, to survive in hopeless circumstances.

Why some people did this and others not may very well have something to do with their life experiences up to that time, their existing character before this horrific experience, and/or their physiology – hormone balance, brain chemistry, thyroid or general health, etc. But I believe that, more often than not, hope is a choice, a decision to endure, learn something, be of use, stick around and see what happens to you. And that choice can be born from the deep desire to preserve something of value –a calling, a relationship, a family, the beauty and pain of LIFE itself.

This month's issue of NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC'S ADVENTURE has an article entitled, "Off the Face of the Earth." (Peter Lane Taylor) It describes a labyrinth of caves in Western Ukraine and tells the recently unearthed story of several Jewish families that survived the Holocaust by living in those caves. 38 people, including a grandmother and a child of 4, spent nearly two years underground – beating all historical records for trained spelunkers. Interviews with survivors revealed the intensity of their will to live and the importance of family in that decision to live – every day.

Many of the survivors would eventually dwindle to two-thirds their normal weight. Yet, surrounded by family, the Stermers were able to draw on more than just physical courage and endurance to keep themselves alive. "We knew that our family would always be loyal to one another," Pepkale said. "Even when things were at their worst, you could always look around and see your sister, your mother, and the rest of your family. It helped us to remember what we were fighting for."

Survival expert Kamler suggests that Pepkale's view is more than sentiment. "The one thing that's common to every survival story is the belief in something greater than yourself. For the Jews hiding in the cave, it was their need to save their families. There's no doubt that family was the number one factor in their survival."
(pp.94-95)

When... I asked if the Stermers felt they were blessed to survive, however, Shulim and Shlomo were dismissive of the notion that divine intervention had played a role in their triumph. God remains a controversial protagonist for almost every Holocaust survivor. But in the Stermers' case specifically, attributing their survival to a higher power risks understating the resolve and the courage it took to fight for every day they stayed alive...

[Shulim said] "When we get together like this and I see the grandchildren, and it's an affair... I see the family and I see nice kids. And I say to myself, It was worth the fight to survive.

The decision to endure – in times of profound evil and danger, in the midst of unimaginable suffering – is an ACT of hope. Even if one feels that God has abandoned them or that there is no God, even if one does not FEEL hopeful – choosing LIFE is a hopeful act – a product of strength and character. And that choice – to ACT on behalf of hope – is often inspired by our loved ones – the network of affection and meaning that we call family.

Perhaps that is part of what Paul meant in his letter to the Church in Rome when he told them that, "Hope does not disappoint us because God's love is poured into our hearts." Often that love is poured into our hearts by our FAMILY - however we might define FAMILY in moments of great adversity. May this family of faith – in all circumstances – inspire each of us to choose Hope again and again.

In closing, a poem by Mary Oliver from Dream Work

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Bulletin

WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship – A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship

Thank you for the sharp sense of the timeless stirring in my time, and your praise in my heart, for the undeniable awareness, quick as now, that the need of you is the truth of me, and your presence with me is the truth of you, which sets me free for others, for joy, for hope, and for you; for your grace... my life... forever.

+ Opening Hymn

These Hills

CSB #92

+ Opening Prayer (unison)

Gracious and Holy One, creator of all things and of emptiness,

I come to you full of much that clutters and distracts,
stifles and burdens me, and makes me a burden to others.
Empty me now of gnawing dissatisfactions, of anxious imaginings,
of fretful preoccupations, of nagging prejudices,
of old scores to settle, and of the arrogance of being right.
Empty me of the ways I unthinkingly think of myself as powerless,
as a victim, as determined by sex, age, race, as being less than I am,
or as other than yours.
Empty me of the disguises and lies in which I hide myself from other people
and from my responsibility for my neighbors and for the world.
Hollow out in me a space in which I will find myself,
find peace and a whole heart, a forgiving spirit and holiness,
the springs of laughter,
and the will to reach boldly for abundant life for myself
and the whole human family.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)

Creator God who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy
will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, And
forgive us our debts As we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil, For Thine is the kingdom and the power And the glory
forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection (you may be seated)

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God offers us hope and abundant life.

We may choose to be open to these gifts!

Sung Response "Hallelujah... God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

O God of timelessness and time, I thank you for my time and for those things that are yet
possible and precious in it; daybreak and beginning again, midnight and the touch of
angels, the taming of demons in the dance of dreams; A word of forgiveness, and
sometimes a song, for my breathing... my life...

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

The Just Peace Reflection was introduced to our worship service by our Just Peace Committee.
It is a weekly reminder of the need for social justice in order to create a peaceful world.

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Scriptures Text: Romans 5:1-5

Sermon Hope is a Choice

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Celebration of Holy Communion

+ Welcome to the Table *I Come With Joy* Hymnal #349
Invitation

Sharing the Bread and the Cup

Communion will be served to you as you remain seated. Please wait until all have been served before eating the bread – and again before drinking the cup – to signify our unity with one another and with all who eat and drink at God's table this day.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

We affirm the goodness of life and the openness of the future because our God is a God of life and love. As God comes to us in this act of communion, so let us go out to others in acts which bring healing, reconciliation and hope to our world. Amen.

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer *Be still and know that I am God* Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response *In Solitude* Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

+ Sending Hymn *We'll Build a Land* CSB #44

+ Commissioning (unison)

Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the spirit who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing flowers.

+ Sung Response Hymnal #458

I've got a feeling everything is gonna be all right.

O I've got a feeling everything is gonna be all right.

O I've got a feeling everything is gonna be all right,
be all right, be all right, be all right.

+ Postlude

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship is by Ted Loder, Guerrillas of Grace p.43

Opening Prayer Ibid. p.46

Prayer of Dedication Ibid. p.42

Commissioning May Sarton, from Singing the Living Tradition #691