

TRUST AND HOPE

October 13, 2019

Romans 15:13

As I began seminary, I was working as a therapist on the mental health unit of a large hospital. The Director of Rehab approached me to ask if I would be interested in joining a team to write a grant to research and develop an innovative residential treatment program for people with Alzheimer's disease. I declined since I was preparing for ordained ministry and would not be available for the implementation of the program.

About six years later, my family and I began to notice that my husband, Bob, seemed to be somewhat forgetful. We chalked it off to his very busy schedule. After all, he was the chairman of the university department and the president of the national professional organization. We had our own "absent-minded professor." But, when I received a call from one of Bob's closest colleagues who voiced her concerns, I made an appointment for a full neuro-psych evaluation. It took quite a bit of talking to get Bob to agree to take the six hour evaluation. As he finish the day with the neuropsychologist, my mellow-mannered husband was very frustrated and angry at the ridiculous things he was expected to do. A week later, the doctor who administered the evaluation reported that, although he scored within normal limits on most indices, there were some significant concerns about his functional levels based on his education and professional life.

Over the course of the next two years, a nationally respected neurologist attempted to determine the cause of Bob's mental decline. What kept floating through my mind was, "Alzheimer's disease." But, the doctor kept reassuring me that a man, just turning fifty, with no risk factors for dementia probably had some other organic cause for his decline. But, as each new test result was negative, my hope dwindled as Bob became more and more forgetful. Finally, an MRI found a cyst in Bob's brain which was causing hydrocephalus, fluid accumulation on the brain. Surgery was scheduled to relieve the fluid pressure. Friends told me about people who underwent the procedure and got their memories back. Praise God, there was light at the end of the tunnel! Everyone was praying for healing, in fact, the members of the church held a special prayer gathering. Bob had the surgery the day before Thanksgiving and walked out of the hospital the next day to join the extended family for Thanksgiving dinner. He was so very happy. Over the course of the next few weeks, there seemed to be some improvement in Bob's memory and we became more confident in our hope. However, six weeks later, a follow-up neuro-psych evaluation showed that although there was some improvement in certain areas, there continued to be general decline. The hydrocephalus was not the primary cause of Bob's memory problems.

In those days, I would walk about five miles each day into the hills and canyons of the local state park. This was not only a time of exercise in the fresh air, this was my time to talk with God. I remember one day when I was actively grieving the loss of my hope for the future. I was practically yelling at God as I let it all hang out. I wanted the doctors to prove me wrong. I wanted my husband back. Come on, Lord, do something! Then, as my emotional energy drained out of me, I was flooded with thoughts and remembrances of Bob and our life together; how much we mean to each other, how we had always been there for each other. And, instead of feeling grief, I felt immense gratitude. My wall of fear starting breaking down as I felt a deep sense of peace. "Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come, 'twas grace that brought me save thus far and grace will lead me home." As I put my complete trust in God, I was filled with hope; not hope for a cure, but hope in God who always had brought me through my challenging times and who, that day, gave me a very clear message, "I did not give you a husband with Alzheimer's

disease, I gave Bob a wife who could see him through. And I will be with you both each step of the way.” I was truly flooded with hope for the first time in years. It was a gift that could only have come by the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, I still call it my divine attitude adjustment. Did my life turn out the way I had hoped and planned? Oh, no. But, by trusting in God, I was filled with hope and confidence to see the blessings and experience the gratitude on a journey I never would have chosen for myself.

It has been said that while there is life there’s hope, but the deeper truth is that only while there is hope is there life. Take away hope, and life, with all its fascinating variety of opportunities and experiences, reduces to mere existence – uninteresting, ungratifying, bleak, drab, a burden and a pain. Many of us have gone through times when hope seemed illusive. Emily Dickinson called it, “A thing with feathers that perches in the soul.” For some of us, hope may be something of a court of last resort. It is what we do after all our planning and preparing is done. It is what we do if we cannot fix whatever the problem is. Such a perspective puts us at the center of the universe, of course, and God is what is there to take up the slack. For others, hope is like buying a lottery ticket. It is imagining that there is some force in the universe that will come to our rescue and give us what we think we want. We may call this “luck” or “fate” or “chance.” Whatever it is, it depends on some random event that comes our way and that just might change our lives for the better.

Neither of these meanings fit with Paul’s understanding of hope. For Paul, hope is neither the last resort nor random chance. For Paul, hope is grounded in the God of “steadfastness and encouragement.” The hope of which Paul writes is not a pie-in-the-sky kind of optimism or wishful thinking. And, it is not a cheery denial of the painful realities of life and death, injustice and suffering. Paul wagered his life on a hope that is grounded in the promises of God and looks forward to the reality to which the gospel of Jesus Christ bears witness.

My friends, hope is the undaunted force that comes through the Holy Spirit, getting into our own human spirits and drawing us beyond the darkness of today and toward the light of God’s new day. We are not afraid of the future for Christian hope expresses the knowledge that, in each day of our lives and every moment beyond, we can trust, on the basis of God’s own commitment, that the best is yet to come. Paul described this reality earlier in his letter to the Romans. He presents Abraham as a model of faith because he believed the promise of God shaping his future. Paul wrote, “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed Being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.” (Rom 4: 1-3, 16-22.) And with that hope, Abraham left his home and journeyed into his future.

You see, hope has major implications for how we live our lives. Hope is not a warm blanket that we wrap around ourselves to protect us as we watch life go by. Hope grounded in trust demands that we commit ourselves to radical openness and obedience to a God who we cannot comprehend or predict or control; to see the world as it is and to seek to discern God’s direction in taking faithful and courageous action. Some may consider this as wild trust and reckless courage, or perhaps just naive stupidity. But to those of us who have experienced the joyous freedom of opening ourselves to the guidance and loving care of our God of Hope, it is the only path to the true freedom of a life worth living.

During the coming weeks, we will be exploring our common trust and our common hopes. It is my prayer that we will be moved to common commitment and common action. One of the ways that we can reinforce our own personal trust in the Lord; one of the ways that we can build hope during these trying times, is to acknowledge the ways in which our God of Hope is filling us with joy and peace. I have found that that begins with gratitude. And so, in your worship bulletins

this morning, you will find a very simple gratitude journal. I strongly recommend that you take time during the next four weeks to use the journal to get in touch with how God has blessed your life. Simple instructions are found on the first page of the journal, however use the journal as is best for you. If you know someone who would benefit from a journal, feel free to take one to them. For those who would like additional information or encouragement, Linda Huffine will be making a presentation at Wednesday Night Dinner. Let's spend time during the next four weeks in gratitude to God together.

And so, my friends, good hoping to you! Or as some say, here's hoping! – hoping as a way of life, hoping as a source of strength and hoping as a fountain of joy in the heart from which gratitude and faith continually flow. Amen