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Thunder Bay ON
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Sermon

Hope Is the Thing with Feathers

Emily Dickinson writes:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.

This morning we look at hope, the thing with feathers.

We'll look first at false hope, or cheap hope, and beyond that, at real hope and some of its characteristics. We'll dig into the darker side of hope. We'll look at a turning point in hope, and finally, at its deeper meaning.

False hope, cheap hope, is common. A man falls over a cliff, and on the way down grabs hold of a bush. As the roots begin to give way, he cries out, "Help!" The clouds part, and a voice like Charlton Heston's says, "Let go and let God!" The man looks down at the rocks and toward the clouds, and says, "Could I speak with someone else?" Sometimes hope is both cheap and sincere, as when it is desperate. A difficult medical diagnosis is given, and the natural first reaction is, "Is there no hope?" A brave question like that can produce remarkable answers.

In the 1930's, the analytical psychologist Carl Jung spent a year treating a patient with chronic alcoholism. One day Jung reluctantly said, No more. Nothing had worked.

The patient cried, "Is there no hope?" Jung said, in medical annals, rarely, a huge spiritual displacement occurred in a patient's life that sometimes led to recovery. He'd been trying to generate such a displacement with his patient for months, unsuccessfully. So, there was no hope, and yet -- a crumb of hope.

The man left Jung, and went looking, desperately, for some kind of spiritual experience. Miraculously, he found it, and as a result millions have found new life, present company included.

Dickinson continues:

And sweetest in the gale is heard
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird

That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

When we look at traditional Christianity, however, some promises of hope seem unbearably shallow. One commentator writes:

"The New Testament development of hope is . . . that in Christ is found the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and hope . . . in the . . . act of divine salvation in Christ . . . [in] the resurrection of the dead . . . , the promises given to Israel . . . , the redemption of the body and of the whole creation . . . , [so painful to read!] eternal glory . . . , eternal life . . . the inheritance of the saints . . . , [and] the return of Christ . . ."

Do you sometimes wish you could believe in these things, because they seem to give those who do believe such comfort and pleasure?

But some of us cannot believe in these things, and still be ourselves. Some are drawn to the doubting side, what we experience as the deeper and truer side. The story-teller Margaret Atwood says, "The story is in the dark."

What are the characteristics of hope?

Dr. Jaklin Elliott of the University of Adelaide, Australia, a scholar of hope, suggests three. First, hope is fluid. It comes and goes. Like a bird, here perching, there flitting away, singing the tune without the words.

Second, hope is relational, between the individual self and something other than, something beyond, the self. Even at the end of life, when our hope of personal survival no longer makes sense, still we can hope for good things, for our children or grandchildren, or friends, or for the welfare of the world. In one fellowship, a 75-year-old woman who had had a distinguished career in the diplomatic corps took an abiding interest in the children of the fellowship, because, she said, "They are the children I never had."

Finally, in addition to being fluid and relational, hope is seekable. Dr. Jung's patient went looking for it, with his life on the line, and he found it, and much more besides.

The crumb of hope that Jung had tossed him, sustained him in that search, and perhaps that's a fourth characteristic of hope, its power to sustain.

When I tutored for the California bar exam, many of my students had failed it before.

They needed plain old hope. So I told them war stories, of students who had struggled, and finally succeeded. I also told them, if you ever doubt whether you're smart enough to practice law, just drop by the courthouse some Monday morning and listen to the lawyers arguing the regular law and motion calendar. As you mutter to yourself, "Gee, I can do better than that," just remember: every single lawyer in that courtroom, has passed the bar exam. If they can do it, why not you?

Hope becomes a doorway, leading - who knows where?

A missionary named Frank Laubach was teaching literacy in the Philippines. Then the Great Depression struck, and charitable contributions dried up. He had to tell the chief of the Maranao tribe that he was working with, that there was no money to support the teachers. The program, it seemed, was over, all hope gone.

The chief called a meeting of his tribe, with Laubach at his side.

"I have seen what literacy has done for our Maranao people," he declared. "This work is too important to stop. It helps our farming. It helps our health. A year ago, I learned to read and write. I am an old man. If I can learn to read and write, anybody can. And -- I can show someone else what I have learned. From now on, we will teach each other, how to read and write.

Each one, teach one." To drive his point home, he took out his sword and waved it over his head.

Each One Teach One became a worldwide movement. Through it, sixty million illiterate people have learned to read and write, one of whom I had the privilege of teaching. The program is still alive and well, right here in Ontario - Each One Teach One.

If a journey is underway, in a certain direction, and then at some mysterious point, the straight line of the journey bends, and the person journeying finds themselves moving in a different direction, just one step, it's nothing, really - yet it is everything.

The bird of hope may have no choice but to be powerful, for it is up against formidable opponents: Despair, and desperation.

Denial. Pessimism and gloom. Existential angst. Indifference and resignation. Like Ted Kooser's student in the library, hope keeps heavy company.

Hope is fluid, relational, seekable, powerful. It is also tricky. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "Beware how you take away hope from any human being." As a judge, he would have known. But taking away hope does not always work as expected. Recently a study asked, Who adjusted better to prison - those sentenced to life in prison with no possibility of parole, or those sentenced to life with a possibility of parole?

Surprisingly, the prisoners with no hope, no possibility of parole - adjusted better.

There is a darker side to hope. Hope can be cruel.

Jane Wagner, Lily Tomlin's partner, said, "[Here is a] sobering thought: what if, at this very moment, I am living up to my full potential?"

In the mid-19th century, a group of 50 to 100 thousand true believers, led by a farmer named William Miller, became convinced that

Jesus Christ would return to earth on March 21, 1843.

They hoped, and they waited, but the date came and went.

No Jesus.

Miller recalculated, and set a new date: October 22, 1844.

They hoped once more, they waited. Same result.

They called it "The Great Disappointment." The embarrassment must have been awful.

Pretty soon, the Millerite movement broke up, and Miller himself died.

But here's the kicker. At least three major religious movements came into being after the great disappointment - the Seventh Day

Adventists, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and, believe it or not, the Baha'is.

Once the fragile hopes were dashed, things more enduring could replace them.

The ancient Greeks sometimes thought hope was cruel, that all hope was false hope.

William L. Anderson writes, of a famous myth:

"[A] curious girl named Pandora [sounds like a limerick, doesn't it?] was instructed not to open a chest Unfortunately,

Pandora gave in to her inquisitiveness and opened the lid . . . ; instantly, all sorts of evil sprang from the box Evil was

[out] in the world, and the whole mess could not be undone.

"However, Pandora was not finished. She opened the chest once again, and [this time] out sprang Hope. Now, in our modern

thinking [Anderson goes on], this second act has been presented as a good thing:

Pandora inexplicably let evil loose in the

world, but at least we also have hope. The ancient Greeks, however, saw things

differently Pandora . . . made things even

worse by giving us hope

"[I]n [some] Greek thinking, hope was not good, but rather an extension of evil Hope would keep people from recognizing their own folly"

You wonder whatever happened to Pandora.

In this Greek view, hope is an illusion. It is like the modern legal scholar who says that individual, personal legal rights --

are what make people unhappy. Consider the client who walks into a lawyer's office and declares, "I know my rights." That is an

unhappy person, likely to remain unhappy. There is no releasing those whom

righteousness has taken hostage. Friedrich Nietzsche

echoed this Greek view when he said that "Hope is the worst of evils, because it prolongs the torments of man."

The lifetime prisoner without hope can say, "Here I am and here I'll die," and get on with what remains of his life. But the prisoner with hope -- is not quite so free.

Hope can offer a turning point, as it did for Dr. Jung's patient. Some turning points may be counterintuitive -- paradoxes.

Here's one: "Surrender to win."

That asks us to acknowledge, at the deepest level we can, what is truly, really hopeless in any given situation, and tramp right through it. If it die, life is gained.

From then on, the idea is, that we are liberated, we are free. We quit fighting impossible battles. Our energy becomes rechanneled, toward the possible.

When we surrender to win, our personal willfulness eases off. Beyond willfulness, lies something solidier. That can be anything, other than willfulness. The will of God, if you like, or the will of the universe, or the Great Spirit, or fate, -- whatever.

Something other than the Great I-Am. There is a Higher Power. It's just not you. How can we recognize this willfulness, this illusory hope, when it has got hold of us? It's much easier to spot in other people.

But when I spot it in another, that means I've got it myself.

Our friends can help us, often better than we can help ourselves. My own willfulness shows up as grinding glass in the pit of my stomach. Or in the stubborn resistance of other people to my pet ideas - resistance that is totally unreasonable, incidentally.

Willfulness shows up in repetition. Doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results - that's a good working definition of insanity. Stuckness is usually a dead giveaway for willfulness.

When we surrender, we don't have to continue doing what hasn't been working. Fresh possibilities emerge, including the possibility of winning. Surrender to win.

This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. (Isn't it wonderful, to be able to celebrate Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day under the same religious roof?)

T.S. Eliot wrote, in the poem called "Ash Wednesday,"

"Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still."

As you know, it is customary to give things up for Lent. Last year at this time, the senior minister of our sister church in Dallas, Texas, the Reverend Doctor Laurel Hallman, suggested that for Lent, we consider

giving up - hope.

I happened to be sitting in the chancel behind her at the time, and I nearly fell out of my chair.

She was careful to caution, pastorally, that if depression is or has been an issue for you, don't give up hope too easily, or for too long. That's sound advice. But finding the courage to look hopelessness straight in the face, to discard the falseness of false hope, the cheapness of cheap hope, as we would discard cheap grace, and meanwhile to treasure the toughness of hope, all of it, including its darker side - there is a lot to be said for that.

For what if some of our more cherished notions finally prove to be counterfeit? For example, what if peace on earth turns out to be -- unattainable? What if there really is no life after death? What if ending world hunger proves impossible? Or if our fragile planet is really, truly doomed, beyond any hope of recovery? Every bone in our bodies, fights against really confronting possibilities like these head on. Certainly there's no need to dwell on them. But, to face them squarely, to engage them more than shallowly, to ask the hard questions, and stay with that conversation long enough to reach the next level, whatever that turns out to be, a level beyond bluster and posturing, beyond opinions and arrogance - surely that is worth the effort.

The experience of truly facing hopelessness may turn out like those experiments with prayer -- when you pray intensely, and the thing you pray for doesn't happen, and then you find out how sincere your prayer was, by how you react to your own great disappointment: Were you humbly asking, or were you ordering, what I call "delegating to God"?

We may never get to the so-called proof stage. If the planet is really doomed, for example, how will we know that? And is it really our business to know that, or are we just flattering ourselves? Today, just for today, all we can do, really, is the best we can, in the time we have, with the resources we have. And "our best" will be more grounded, our approach more informed, more measured and substantial, if we have found the courage, beforehand, to put aside cheap hope, and walk into, and stay with, the really tough questions.

You know how, every time you misplace your keys, it's not until you finally give up, abandon now and forevermore all hope of finding them, that the little devils decide to magically reappear. Is that literally true? It is emotionally true.

For on the other side of hopelessness, in a place beyond despair, real hope sits, as solid as concrete. Our vision clears. More confidence emerges, and deeper resolve. We become more realistic, our energies more focused on genuine things. Denial gets eased aside, and fear diminishes. Real stuff has a chance to happen.

The courage to squarely confront hopelessness may require a kind of faith that feels unfamiliar, or even alien, to some of us. And that's all right. We don't show up on Sunday mornings to be petted - we don't need church for that --, but to be stretched and challenged, to learn to care, and not to care. It doesn't matter so much where the conversation takes us, provided we stay with it, as deeply and sincerely as we can. What matters is doing what we can, here and now, acknowledging that the final result may not be entirely up to us.

At a preaching seminar a couple of years ago, we were asked what we used as touchstones for sermons. I said, "I try to share something in the sermon, that costs me something to share." Several ministers came over afterward and said, "Thanks. I'll remember that."

Anne Lamott tells us: "Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up."

After all, when it gets darkest, that's when the stars come out.

The co-founders of the original 12-step program, after they had gotten sober, went searching for another drunk to work on. They found a man in a hospital, shackled to the bed. He was there for the eighth time in six months, and he had just blacked the eyes of two nurses. Everyone said he was a grand fellow -- when he was sober.

They talked with him, told him something of their own stories. He conceded that they certainly knew what they were talking about.

He was glad for them that this thing that they had developed, whatever it was, was working for them.

But he knew it wouldn't work for him. His case was hopeless. The last few times he'd left the hospital after drying out, he got drunk before he even made it home.

He'd been a prominent attorney, a city councilman, a solid member of his church. But he'd lost all that. His case was hopeless.

They asked if he'd like them to stop by again, and he said sure.

A few days later, his wife was visiting, when he caught sight of them. Eagerly, he said to her, "Those are the fellows I told you about. They are the ones who understand!"

After they had left, he told them, deep down inside, he found himself saying, If those fellows can do it, maybe I can too. As the four of them were visiting, he suddenly asked his wife to gather up his clothes. He walked out of the hospital that afternoon, a free man, never to drink again. He died nineteen years later, still sober.

Hope, that tiny thing with feathers, meant life to him.

Let us close with a reading from Reinhold Niebuhr. Number 461, in the hymnbook. 461. Let's read it all together.

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime;
therefore we are saved by hope.
Nothing true or beautiful or good
makes complete sense in any immediate context of history;
therefore we are saved by faith.
Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;
therefore, we are saved by love.
No virtuous act is quite as virtuous
from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own;
therefore, we are saved by the final form of love
which is forgiveness."

May it be so.
Amen.

Benediction

A curious girl named Pandora
Was admiring the fauna and flora
Took the lid off a box
Evil spread like a fox
And there was no more o' Pandora.

Amen.