

## And Hope Does Not Disappoint Us

John Wilkinson

June 14, 2020

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

Romans 5:1-11

Friends, I have a dilemma to share with you, and it may be your dilemma as well. But first, a little story.

When COVID struck and Zoom took over, some of you noticed a big blue foam bandage on my left index finger, and asked about it. I have no good story to tell, just a very sharp knife and a loaf of bread and a scene that looked like something from a “Kill Bill” movie.

Others of you noticed the wrist of that same hand, and these two items – my “bling” – and have asked about them.

The purple bracelet is in memory of my mother. It was her favorite color. We had them made for the first Thanksgiving we gathered after her death. The wording has long worn off, but it had her initials, and the date, and a favorite, personal family saying. To get a deal, you needed to order a bunch, which I did, yet I can’t find myself replacing this one with words I can actually read.

As to the other bracelet. At a later Thanksgiving, after my dad died, my sister, the teacher, brought arts and crafts, and we made bracelets, using a little hammer to punch letters on to a metal disk. After pondering for several minutes, I decided. Two words. “Urgency and hope.” I’ve worn it since, coupled with the purple bracelet, even though it clatters at the keyboard. Both have meaning to me.

Urgency and hope. It is taken, you might remember, from the Confession of 1967, our denomination’s effort now more than 50 years ago, to articulate a theological vision for the church and the world.

Here is what the Confession of 1967 says about all this. “Already God’s reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring *hope* in all people and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption. *With an urgency born of this hope*, the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast *hope*, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God.”

Urgency and hope. We work – urgently. Urgency denotes a sense of leaning in, of passion and intensity, restlessness, even discomfort in the effort.

But it does not denote fear and it does not denote anxiety and it does not denote panic.

And hope. That's even more important. It can feel even more elusive. And thus my dilemma...

This past March, I heard a lecture by theologian Miguel De La Torre, who wrote a well-known book called *Embracing Hopelessness*. De La Torre's provocative point is something like this: how can we talk of hope, especially to people who are chronically and systemically oppressed, black people, the poor, persons of color, immigrants. Those who live in the dominant culture – and De La Torre is talking to me – “must refute the temptation to insist the oppressed must have hope...Hope cannot be imposed,” he says. (Page 155) And more and more deeply I am coming to understand that space.

On the other hand – just the other day I heard Bryan Stevenson being interviewed on the radio. Stevenson is a lawyer who wrote *Just Mercy*, which we will discuss Wednesday night.

You would be benefitted by an encounter with Stevenson – his Ted Talk, videos and interviews. He was asked about hope, and hopelessness. “The enemy of hopelessness is justice,” he said. And more and more deeply I am coming to understand that space as well.

So...hope or hopelessness? Hopeful or hopeless?

I want to believe “with an urgency born of this hope,” not just to affirm a Presbyterian creed, not just to validate a little bracelet I wear, but because I believe in hope.

Hope that is not wishful thinking, hope that is not naïve optimism, hope that is not, even, some dynamic that kicks in that tells us there is a better life awaiting and that asks oppressed people to believe that even more in order to alleviate the crushing sins of the present.

I want hope to be real, and justice-oriented. I want hope to be active, not passive. I want hope to unsettle me, and more. I want hope to matter. I want hope to be urgent.

The Apostle Paul is swimming in deep theological waters in his letter to the church at Rome. Big questions: how we are saved. Big words: grace, and faith, and reconciliation. But he is also concerned with how we live our lives, because he knows, just some brief decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, that the church has a very long way to go, a very long way, to establish any kind of sustainability or even safety.

We follow a man whom religion and politics killed, Paul reminds his readers regularly, and even though he was raised from the dead, struggle preceded that, and the struggle will be a part of our experience. So not only do we “boast” – that's the word, boast – not only do we boast about our relationship with God, but we boast about where it takes us, even if it takes us to difficult places.

Paul works out a progression that feels profound – “suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope.” I love that. It feels like something every coach said to me ever, as I ran an extra lap or lifted an extra set or shot another 25 free throws. And I understand that we all face suffering in some way, at some point. A death, a loss, a disappointment, an illness. The things life throws at us.

For many of us, though, suffering is not systemic, and so I would want to ask Paul about what boasting in suffering means, and I want to understand in our current context in such a way that does not allow oppressors off the hook, for example, or that thinks of racism as simply a reality to be accepted, like the weather.

David Brooks, the conservative *Times* columnist, has written about “character,” how values like kindness, bravery, honesty, faithfulness, allow us to flourish, together, in community. “Character produces hope,” Paul writes. In this multi-dimensional moment, facing ethical, political, moral, medical, ecological, economic crises, character is the quality we need the most, inside each of us and among all of us. Character that produces hope.

So back to my dilemma, seeking a hope that matters, that can make a difference, that is urgent. The Greek word for “hope” used in Romans is a forward-leaning understanding – an expectation. In the New Testament it often means hope of salvation, which is fine. It is not quite “hope now,” which is what we need, the hope produced by character that not only will not disappoint, but will drive toward change, urgently.

The theologian Douglas Ottati writes of “hopeful realism,” and perhaps that is where we need to be. Ottati writes that “Hopeful realism refuses both easy optimisms and cynical pessimisms. It suggests that we do not really know ourselves when we concentrate on our abilities apart from our limits and our faults. However, it also claims that we do not truly know ourselves when we consider our limits and our faults apart from our abilities and apart from the traces of true communion in community that we encounter in God’s world.” (Page 3) That is to say, we humans are a jumble of limits and faults and gifts and graces. If we are true to that understanding, we will refuse easy optimisms – the passive notion that this will all just work out. And we also refuse cynical pessimisms, the equally passive notion that nothing can be done about any of this, racism included.

That is when we can return to Paul’s progression, that we need both the endurance to work for change over the long-haul and the character to persevere in the face of disappointment, discomfort, suffering and anything else that would knock us off course.

That is hope, the trust in Jesus – strong trust in Jesus, whose solidarity – let’s call it “grace” – we do not have to earn, but that we can claim, by faith, as an absolutely free gift.

Robert Kennedy said that “history will judge you, and as the years pass, you will ultimately judge yourself, in the extent to which you have used your gifts and talents to lighten and enrich the lives of your fellow (women) and men. In your hands lies the future of your world and the fulfillment of the best qualities of your own spirit.” That feels hopeful to me, hope that carries the burden of expectation, hope that is the product of the endurance and character that faith produces.

Writer Marilynne Robinson writes that we are experiencing a “decline in hope and purpose...a crisis of civilization requiring reflection and generous care for the good of the whole society and its place in the world...All this comes down to the need to recover and sharpen a functioning

sense of justice,” she says, “act(ing) justly even at steep cost to ourselves.” (*New York Review of Books*, “What Kind of Country Do We Want?,” June 11, 2020)

“Hope is the thing with feathers,” Emily Dickinson famously wrote, “that perches in the soul.” And it is. It is the thing with feathers, perched in the soul.

But hope is also the thing that has arms and legs and flesh and blood and sweat, that, when lived out in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, will not disappoint us. Amen.