

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 29, 2023 – The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
Hope
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning in The Collect of the Day we prayed that God would “increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity” or love, which have been known as the Three Theological Virtues. In his first letter to the church in Corinth St. Paul wrote, “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Today I want to speak about the theological virtue of hope. If you will be staying for the Funeral Planning Workshop after worship today, you may consider this as an Introduction because when we consider the death of our bodies in terms of Christian faith, hope is central. Hope is also especially important as we try to come to terms with violence and bloodshed, whether in the Holy Land or in our own community of Lewiston, Maine. How could we bear knowing about the tragedy in the world if we lacked hope?

Did you know that in The Book of Common Prayer there is “An Outline of the Faith” or Catechism? You can find it on pages 844 through 862. This catechism provides a summary of the Church’s teaching in question-and-answer form. It can be very helpful if you want to learn or be reminded of the basics of what we profess to believe. Regarding hope, The Prayer Book states that “the Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world” (p. 861).

Christian hope centers in God. We believe in and hope for the triumph of God’s love over hate, God’s justice over injustice, God’s freedom over bondage, community with God over separation, life with God over the power of death. We have many sources of this hope, chiefly the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. In the words of St. Augustine “we are a resurrection people and our song is ‘Alleluia’”. Christ’s resurrection is perhaps our most powerful sign that the final victory belongs to God and not to sin and death.

As individuals we hope for fullness of life with God, something we only partially experience now. We believe that every human being is a child of God and important to God. So, I can believe that I am a child of God and important to God, just as you can believe that you are a child of God and important to God. We believe that God wants the health and salvation of all God’s children, and we hope to be finally healed, finally saved, finally at home with God. That is our hope for ourselves, our hope for the people we love, and, by God’s grace, our hope for all people. Christians also hope for the renewal of all creation. We look forward to a new heaven and a new earth. We hope for nothing less than the redemption of the world by God.

In her book, “Gathering at God’s Table: The Meaning of Mission in the Feast of Faith,” former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori writes about living in joyful hope. I would like to share some of her wise words with you: “Christian communities are places of hope. We’re all in the same boat – we’re looking for home, we want to belong, we want to be valued, we want to be welcomed in a place of safety and warmth by people who love us.... We gather as a community to catch a glimpse of a dream that’s big enough and encouraging enough to begin to drive out fear and where we can begin to experience a deep and abiding and transforming hope.... Hope – holy hope, even holy hope-filled boldness – is the only known antidote for fear, depression, boredom, abandonment, lostness, exile, grief. Hope is what our faith demands, and offers” (pages 186-189).

Our holy hope orients us to the future, but also guides us now, in the present. Genuine hope for – and faith in – the promise of the establishment of God’s kingdom forever will lead to love in action now. Because our faith and our hope make it impossible for us to accept the world of injustice and suffering as it is without doing what we can to bring justice, mercy, peace, and relief to God’s children with whom we live in this time and this place.

Hope has the power to transform our lives. This transformation may come through asking ourselves this question: how does our behavior affect the hope of others? In the service of Evening Prayer in The Book of Common Prayer there is a series of suffrages or intercessory prayers (pages 121-2). They include these words: “Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten; nor the hope of the poor be taken away.” “Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.” How can we help make sure that the hope of the poor is not taken away?

In the next two months we will celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas. Even in the secular world we are and will be reminded to be thankful for the blessings we enjoy and to be generous in giving to others as an expression of love. How might we celebrate these holidays in such a way that the needy are not forgotten and the hope of the poor is not taken away? One way is by supporting the St. Elizabeth’s Annual Coat and Boot Drive centered at our Cathedral in Portland. That is one place where what we do intersects with “the hope of the poor.” Think of the hope of the people who line up at the Cathedral to receive a warm coat and a pair of boots. We don’t have to hope for these things. We may not be looking forward to the cold of winter, but we have the warm clothes we need to face the cold. Imagine hoping for those clothes and those boots and imagine how our gifts will be the fulfillment of that hope for a few of God’s children. This is only one example of how our hope – our prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” – can shape our lives today.

Think of your hopes: for care and compassion when you are suffering with illness or grief, for companionship when you are lonely, for help when you are burdened by too much work or too many responsibilities. Do you know someone who is hoping for these things, someone you can help? Can you give a kind word or lend a helping hand to someone and give them hope for a better day?

Once again, we need to remember that our hope centers in God. The problems in the world are too big for us. I believe that we are called to do what we can to address the problems of the world, certainly. But the enormity of the world’s problems could lead us to despair if we thought that human beings were our only hope. God is our hope. God’s purpose for the world is what we pray for, what we hope will be fulfilled. We are small and what we can do may be little, but, in the words of St. Paul to the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 3:20-21), God “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” and so “to [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”