

50 YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF ST MATTHEW'S  
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*Without thy love,  
without thy compassion,  
and without thy guidance,  
we are nothing.*

*Give unto us, this congregation these blessings,  
That we may be a blessing unto Thee,  
in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Honey Barlow, May, 1966

This morning, what I want to talk about is "Hope." "Hope" is a wonderful, God-given human quality! We would be lost without it--we would not survive without it! Life would be dull without it!

According to eminent developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, Hope is both the earliest and the most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive. If life is to be sustained, hope must remain, even where confidence is wounded, trust impaired.

According to Erikson we are hard-wired for hope. Such hope has led some of us to literally reach for the stars; Hope leads us thru impossible situations to overcome overwhelming odds. Without hope there would be no color or energy in our lives, no romance or celebrations. As Erikson said, "if life is to be sustained, hope must remain."

How we play our hope cards depends on our circumstances and dispositions, and, of course, much could be said about the noble ways we encourage each other when our hope buckets get low. We humans are, indeed, "wonderfully and marvelously made!"

Nevertheless, the fundamental question each of us must ask is, "is my hard-wired hope sufficient for my total human experience?" St. Paul, together with the witness of the

entire New Testament, says that the hope we are given just by being born, is not sufficient for the fulfillment of our destiny--we need something more!

Paul closes the 13th Chapter of his 1st letter to the Corinthians with, "Now abide faith, hope, love, these three, and the greatest of these is love."

In the last book he wrote, A Glory in it All, Reflections after Eighty, John Knox says of this verse, "Love," for Paul, is God's love for us, indeed for all his creation, poured out in abundance, in Christ Crucified for our sins;

"Faith," for Paul means our acceptance of that Love, our trusting Christ, our letting his Love fill and overflow our hearts.

Concerning "Hope," Knox says: "For it is simply a matter of fact that we cannot trust the love of God to the point of giving ourselves up to it without finding ourselves possessed of an indefeasible, invincible hope--a conviction, both intuitive and logical, that nothing can separate us from this love; that there is a sovereign Goodness which will not let go its hold upon us, despite our sin and our folly, despite our doubt and unbelief; a Goodness which will accompany us through our tears, through the failure of our physical and mental powers, through our dying, and at the last will lead us into the experience of what this same love has prepared for us."

This kind of Hope, then, is different from our 'hard-wired kind of hope'. This kind of Hope comes from the recognition and acceptance of the fact that we have a special, permanent relationship with Christ, which is our Faith, our trust in God's love:

Having made such a decision to join our life with God's love, we find ourselves, to use the words again of John Knox, "possessed with an indefeasible, invincible hope", an extraordinary, Christian Hope.

This Hope, which is not limited to our mortality, works along side of and in addition to, the hard-wired hope that God gives us as part of our just being alive.

What we discover is that this extraordinary Hope is given not for us alone; it is a gift that can not be contained--the joy of it can not be repressed.

This Hope, then, presupposes a Relationship, an inseparable and eternal relationship with the One whose Love we have allowed to fill our hearts and control our lives.

That Relationship effects a transformation, a change in the way we see and value things and people.

Transformed, we find ourselves possessed with Hope, and a need to share that Hope with others by word and deed, to share the mercy of Christ with others as their needs become known to us.

During the VietNam War there was a VietCong Soldier stationed as a guard at the Hanoi Hilton Prison, a place where hope was in short supply for the captives who were forced to be there. One of the prisoners he was to guard was an American Navy Pilot, who was regularly tortured by his captors.

Each night, to add to this prisoner's agony, he would be tightly bound to give him no relief from continuous pain. The guard, however, would come into the prisoner's cell each night, and loosen the ropes to make his prisoner more comfortable, then re-tighten the ropes again before the next shift.

The prisoner did not understand why this guard was doing this, until at Christmas, when all the prisoners were allowed to stand outside for one hour. He said this guard stood next to him, made the sign of the cross in the sand with his foot, and then quickly erased it. The prisoner said, "There were 2 Christians standing side by side on that Christmas morning."

Notwithstanding our empathy for the prisoner who was John McCain, the hero of this piece of the whole story was the Guard, who obviously had a relationship with Jesus Christ, who had been transformed by that relationship, and who knew this extraordinary Hope.

In spite of the risk, he had a need to act mercifully in behalf of his prisoners--his designated enemies--to share the Hope that was in him, that they too might experience the hope he knew which was the love of Jesus Christ.

At the time St. Matthews was one year old, my family was in Houston, living out the American Dream. We were happy with many friends and no issues that I recall, except maybe a tight budget. Carl, was 6 years old, and, Beth Ann was 3. At 33, I had a great job as a Senior Sales Engineer with Texas Instruments. I felt self-sufficient, with high hopes, and great expectations.

In April, 1959, however, our family was suddenly blindsided. The pediatric hematologist at Texas Children's Hospital told us Carl had a blood disease, called aplastic anemia. The doctor tried to put a positive spin on what he could do to cure this disease, but his words were not convincing. Carl's diagnosis came like a kick in the stomach leaving Carolyn and me with all the emotions you would expect: fear, helplessness, disillusionment--hopelessness! I was dangling over the abyss by a fragile thread.

On the following Sunday, friends took us to attend a four-day preaching mission, held at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church. The Speaker was the rev Sam Shomaker, from Pittsburgh, PA. That these friends took us there, and that Sam Shoemaker was the speaker, three days after we had heard about Carl's illness, had to be a divine coincidence.

Neither of us would have automatically turned to God or the Church. And even as bereft as we were, given the hard-wired hope with which we had been endowed, I know we would have made it through even that crisis. But, I ask myself, at what cost? And I can't even begin to imagine the different outcome! That we went to hear Sam literally changed our lives!

Sam's Message was titled "The Stream of the Holy Spirit", but it was something far more than Sam Shomaker's words alone, that penetrated my confusion and bewilderment, my fear and pain. By the end of Sam's Preaching Mission, I knew at the core of my being that God was on my side, and would stand with me in the dark days ahead. I had a rope to cling to, and that rope was the love of God in Jesus Christ. It's Carolyn's story to tell, but the same sense of the reality of God's presence, resided in her as well.

Sam strongly recommended to his audience that we form into Christian Groups, with whom we could meet regularly, to pray and study the Bible. Five other couples that heard Sam speak agreed to start such a group with Carolyn and me. By the following week, we had a group going, meeting in each other's homes, using Bible Commentaries to shore-up our great ignorance of the Bible.

After the group met in our home for the first time, I sensed the presence of holiness, something that made me think of static electricity. Never before had so many prayers and thoughts about God been expressed in our small home. Carolyn had gone to bed, and was reading, when I went into Carl's room and knelt at his bedside to pray for him. While I was praying, I experienced, for the first and only time in my life, a tangible presence of God: a numinous reality, surrounding us, but mostly behind me. There was no heat or sound or vision, only a thought that clearly formed in my head: "you are to become an Episcopal Priest"

For a rational, degree-in-physics, left brain, non Church-going, non Episcopalean, agnostic, I felt this experience to be completely off-the-wall and bizarre. But I'm as certain today, as I was then, that it really happened.

For the next three months, life, as I had known it, radically changed. With Carl we made regular Trips to the Hospital for Blood Transfusions; My days began at 5 AM with Reading the Bible and other Xtn Authors; Our weekly couple's Prayer Bible Study Group still met; I also found an early morning Men's Group at another Episcopal Church; We attended the Wed Holy Communion/Healing Service at St. John's. My appetite for reading Christian Books was insatiable. And, Oh yes--there was my day job at Texas Instruments.

Carl died three months later on August 4, 1959. Walking through the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" only begins to describe the paralyzing pain of the grief process. The fact that our prayers for healing were not answered was a bitter disappointment. But, somehow I still trusted the mystery of God's love.

Knowing that Carl, too, was in relationship with that same Love was of great comfort to me. Though Carl and I were separated, I still felt we were connected, and I could pray for

him as I hoped he would pray for me. Living through that first year without Carl was hard--"grief work" hard! My Hope was supported greatly by the Church with which I became very much involved.

A year after Carl's death, Paul Williams and another Engineer left TI, and asked me to join them in forming a new company, which I did. In spite of the enjoyment, excitement and challenge of this new business venture, the idea of my becoming a Priest persisted.

Like a beach ball, I kept trying to push under the water, it kept popping up again. I would argue against it saying that surely my being a dedicated and successful Layman could do just as much good as my being ordained. Other times, like Ebenezer Scrooge after his first Ghostly vision, I thought that maybe what I had experienced that night beside Carl's bed was nothing more than an undigested, piece of potato.

Then, there was the matter of asking my family which had grown to include Heather and Laura, to live a life of hardship, living out of a missionary barrel, so to speak. This image was my conception of what life in the ministry would be like.

Finally, after three years, Carolyn saw my struggle over this issue was not going away, and reluctantly agreed that I should begin the process to be accepted into seminary. Once that decision was made, it was like Moses parting the Red Sea! As the doors opened, and we began the transition into a new life and career, her reluctance soon turned with mine into joy and excitement!

Four years after Carl died, our family that had been living the American Dream, began living another Dream in Austin, Texas, where I began my studies at the Episcopal Seminary. Christian Hope had begun for us in the worst tragedy of our lives; Four years later, that same Hope was being worked out in some of the most Joyful days of our lives.

Turning to another man who found extraordinary hope, Matthew was a Jew who worked for Rome as a tax collector, most likely at Capernaum, close to Nazareth.

The upside to being a Tax Collector was that he could make as much money as his conscience would allow. The downside was that he had already been excommunicated from family and synagogue. Most likely, his only friends were other tax collectors, outsiders like himself.

Because the Gospel that bears his name, is the most Jewish of the Gospels in the New Testament, it seems that Matthew must have deeply loved his Jewish tradition, and to have been alienated from his tribe would have been more painful than we can know .

Here was a man that human hope could not resolve of ever again being included at table with his people, much less of being acceptable into the Kingdom of heaven that the itinerate preacher from Nazareth spoke about. But then, surprise on top of surprise, this preacher pointed his finger at Matthew. Suddenly, undeservedly, he was being asked to join Jesus--Suddenly, he was included, accepted by Jesus, by Love. A man without hope, suddenly had hope! We can only imagine his joy!

The ex-Tax Collector, Matthew, now filled with hope, would later write, a Gospel, a Good News, an Account of the Hope that was within Him. Both Matthew and Luke recall the teaching of Jesus called the Beatitudes, but it is only Matthew's Gospel that remembers these six verses:

5.4 "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

5.5 "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are--no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

5.7 "You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.

5.8 "You're blessed when you get your inside world--your mind and your heart--put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

5.9 "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

5.10 "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

Matthew, as our Patron Saint, was a man without hope for what his soul desired most, who experienced extraordinary hope through his faith in the love of God through Jesus Christ.

As John Claypool used to say “To err is human, but to despair is presumptuous.” For God always has the last word!

St. Matthew is such a good Icon for us for he shows us that despair is indeed presumptuous. I can think of no better legacy for us to have inherited here at this parish.

This day we celebrate the lives of all those people who for 50 years have trusted in the love of God, and who have shared their Christian Hope in word, and deed. Look around! We see so many tangible signs of the Hope that they have passed on to us: in these buildings they created as well as in the unique Christian culture God created through those who have worshipped and served here. During those 50 years, only God knows how many lives He has healed or comforted through the ministries of members of this parish.

Though many are gone, out of sight, they are still with us as the Communion of Saints who gather with us around this Table, We are all bonded together by God’s Love through Christian Hope, because God never lets any of us go.

“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our lord.”

Romans 8:39

That’s Hope you count on, not just for now, but now and always! AMEN

