

The Virtue of Hope
Rev. Kathleen Owens
May 8, 2011

The story starts this way: “There was once a poor family who lived in a drab little house in the neglected part of the city. They tried to be a happy family, but times were hard, and jobs were not easy to come by. As time went on, they began to feel more and more depressed. You could see their depression etching itself even on the house they lived in. They no longer bothered to clean the windows. They didn’t tend the little patch of garden in front of the house. The paint peeled off the door and cracks appeared in the brickwork.”¹

So far, not a pleasant story...but one that I would think most of us in this room could easily understand and maybe even identify with at some time or another in our lives. You might be wondering when does hope come into being in this sermon – that is the title of it – The Virtue of Hope. It is and it will. And there are times in our lives when hope may not seem possible. Times when our lives reflect the reading we heard earlier. Hope is an important quality to have and maintain in our lives. But what is it really? We know when we don’t have it, we know when our lives are without it...but with it? For some, the very cautious, or for those who have had it hard for so very long – to have hope can feel like a dangerous thing in one’s life. And when times have been hard – we want hope – we want to believe that things, that life will be better. We hope for better grades, better test results. We hope the person elected will be honest, will fulfill the promises made on the campaign trail. We hope for good news, better jobs and better pay. We hope to keep our jobs and hope the pay is enough to pay our bills. We hope love will come our way; we hope, hope, hope...And it has been said, hope is not a plan.

¹ “The Magic Vase” – traditional story from One Hundred Wisdom Stories from around the world, edited by Margaret Silf, page 41.

This sermon series on virtue ends with the virtue of hope. We have been exploring several virtues because living a life of virtue, as Aristotle wrote, leads to a life of happiness. In our faith, we believe living a life of virtue leads to salvation not by grace or faith but by character; we hold that virtuous acts come from living life from that best part of ourselves. We come here to practice. We've explored how the virtue of wisdom requires developing a sense of curiosity; that the virtue of courage has both an inner and outer manifestation: inner is the courage to be – all of who you are, truly, your best self; the outer is the courage to do – to see evil close at hand and take steps to confront it despite the danger and to see good afar off and take steps toward it despite the risks. We learned that the virtue of compassion requires an awareness that we are all vulnerable; the virtue of justice comes from our sense of beauty and symmetry in the world and that we can create it; the virtue of temperance says yes, but not too much; it is balance in all things; last month the virtue of transcendence showed that the divine is not separate from us, or the earth but rather related and connected to all. This whole series came from the workshop given by the Rev. Dr. Galen Guengerich at our General Assembly June 2010. Regarding the virtue of hope: there is a dictionary definition of hope – as a verb it is to desire (something) with some possibility of fulfillment.² It is desire mixed with expectation. We are often encouraged to be hopeful. In times like these, how we do cultivate hope?

Guengerich says we need three things: a sense of humor to escape the clutches of the present; we need faith to imagine the contours of the future and we need optimism to work from the present to the future. A sense of humor allows us not take ourselves, our life circumstances so seriously that we become, as in the story at the beginning, so depressed that even our house or our space looks it. Humor allows one to find room to breath – it frees the spirit. When was the last time you had a good belly laugh? Or at least found yourself laughing out loud? Humor and

² World English Dictionary – www.dictionary.com – hope as a verb

the ability to laugh especially at one's self, is critical to good health, physically and mentally. Laughing doesn't mean you can't be serious or that you underestimate the importance of the circumstances. Humor can be healing and restorative. Laughter, humor can be the best medicine –especially when we are surrounded by and overcome by life and its difficulties. We need a sense of humor to escape the clutches of the present.

We also need faith to imagine the contours of the future. In religious terms – hope comes from faith, leap of faith from world as it is to the world as it might become. Faith allows us to view the future differently from our experience in the present. The definition of faith – it is something like mystery... “it lives on the boundary of certainty and mystery...faith is a commitment to live as if certain things are true even if we can't prove them.” What might that be? What about that joy, that love is possible? That people can change? That healing happens. These are things that are true but I can't prove them to you – they are experiences, they just are. William Sloane Coffin was a minister who was known as a force for progressive religion here in American and in the world. His life was faith embodied. In the 1960s he was the Chaplain at Yale University and publicly opposed the Vietnam War; he marched alongside Martin Luther King Jr and became a powerful voice for civil rights for all. He served as Senior Minister of the Riverside Church in New York City and said of faith: “What is faith? Faith is being grasped by the power love. A leap of faith isn't so much a leap of thought as of action. For while in many matters it is first we must see, then we will act; in matters of faith it is first we must do then we will know; first we will be and then we will see. One must, in short, dare to act wholeheartedly without absolute certainty.”³ What have you given yourself to, wholeheartedly? Faith is a commitment to live as if certain things are true even if we can't prove them.

³ Credo by William Sloane Coffin, page 7.

The story from the beginning of the sermon continues: you'll remember, the family is depressed and the house, with its dirty windows and its poorly-tended garden, with its peeling paint and cracked bricks looks it. "One day, the eldest son of the family was roaming idly through the town and he came upon a market place. The stallholders had set up their wares, and there was a bustle of activity. In spite of his feelings of near-despair, the boy found himself being caught up in the excitement of the morning market.

"He stopped to watch the people buying fruit and vegetables, freshly baked bread and tempting cakes. He noticed the queue at the fish stall, and took a deep breath of pleasure as he passed the stall of fresh summer flowers.

"But the stall that attracted him most was a little second-hand stall, tucked away among the awnings of the regular marketeers. He had never noticed this stall before. He stopped to investigate. And there, hidden away in the dark recesses, he noticed a beautiful vase.

"Rapidly, he fingered the coins in his pocket. He had just enough to meet the modest cost of the vase, but there would be nothing left over. 'Ah well,' he thought to himself. 'Why not? Even if we have a few lean days, I am going to buy this vase. Mum will love it. Everyone will love it.' And he handed over the contents of his pocket to the man behind the counter.

"As he wrapped the vase in brown paper, the stallholder said to the boy, 'Enjoy it, won't you? And treat it well, because it is a magic vase.' With these mysterious words ringing in his ear, the lad went off home, proudly carrying his purchase.

"Everyone at home was delighted with the vase, and no one reproached him for spending his last few coins on it. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"When Dad saw the vase, he realized how shabby the room was and he went to the cellar, got out the paintbrushes, and gave the room a makeover. And when the second son saw how nice

the room looked, with its fresh coat of paint, he fetched a bucket of water and washed the windows, for the first time in years. When the third son looked out of the bright new windows, he realized what a state the garden was in, and went outside to dig it over. When the fourth son saw the newly dug garden, he planted seeds in the flower bed and watered them lovingly, all through the spring. When summer came and the baby daughter of the family went out to play in the garden, she noticed the flowers that had grown from the seeds, and she gathered a bunch of them to give to her mother.

“ ‘Here are some pretty flowers, Mummy,’ she said, ‘because we love you.’ Mum was overjoyed. With tears rising in her eyes, and a lump in her throat, she put the flowers in the magic vase.”⁴

Having a sense of humor – to enjoy what’s possible and not be caught by the present day circumstances. Having faith to imagine a different future from what we live with today. Faith that says we can do one thing and a difference is made. Optimism helps us work from the present to the future; optimism is the discipline of living a hope-filled life. Optimism comes from faith – from being seized by love...by acting wholeheartedly. “Economist Paul Krugman said hope isn’t a plan” – but my colleague the Rev. Guengerich says hope happens when we have a plan. We must ask ourselves, what is the plan? What are the steps we are going to take to move forward to our future? What will be our magic vase that motivates us to do what needs to be done so that we can maintain hope – nurture our sense of humor, deepen our faith to shape the future and then take action to move toward it.

For me, one of the magic vases we have in this community is our children. We dedicated a few this morning. Though I am not a mother through biology, I care for, feel responsible to and am committed to our children’s growth in this community. In the dedication we had earlier, we

⁴ Silf.

all acknowledged and pledged our support for these our families here. We all play a role here. And we have all, at some point or another been loved and nurtured by someone in our lives – be it our birth mothers, adopted moms, dads, aunts, uncles, elders or friends. We have, we are and continue to be held by Love universal – it is a matter of faith and we are invited to do the same for one another, even now. Living in this way, with humor and optimism, I have great hope – for all of us. May you join me. Amen.

Benediction: with faith to face our challenges, with love that casts out fear, with hope to trust tomorrow, we accept this day as the gift it is: a reason for rejoicing. Amen.