

Hope: The Energy of Transformation

May 14, 2017

Today's Gospel is one of the greatest stories of redemption ever told. After his abject and utter desertion of Jesus on Good Friday, Peter is not only forgiven; he's commissioned. He's sent out to do God's work in the world.

There are dozens of beautiful nuances that our author weaves into this text. Perhaps the most important being that Jesus initiates the healed relationship. So often in our interpersonal relationships, we believe that the person who has done the wrong, the perpetrator of the offense, needs to initiate reconciliation. Society says that the person in the wrong needs to make the first move. But in this amazing story of healing, Jesus initiates. Jesus, the one who had been deserted, abandoned, left out to dry when the chips were down – Jesus is the one. It shows us that either side can be the initiator in reconciliation and healing.

Along with the fact that Jesus initiates the reconciliation, some other beautiful facets of this passage include the fact that, just as Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus asked him if he loves him three times. The symbolism is clear. Jesus forgives the full extent of Peter's sin – everything, all of it, wholly and completely. Of course, the three-fold question, "Do you love me?" is also Trinitarian, telling us that this forgiveness and this redemption are Godly, not merely of this world, but divine.

There also subtle facets like the fact that the same word that's used earlier in the Gospel for the fire that Peter warms himself beside in the priest's courtyard is used in this story when Jesus grills breakfast for his friends. Oh, that grilled breakfast! This is yet another image for us of Communion, another example of Jesus' sacramental sharing of himself in the context of a meal. All of these facets and more make this not just an amazing historical story of redemption, but also a prototype for our own forgiveness and healing.

Of everything about this passage, though, the thing that I'd like to focus on today is hope. Hope. A couple weeks ago, one of the confirmation youth asked in class about what happened to Judas after Jesus' resurrection. We talked briefly about the two very different accounts of Judas' death, one in Matthew and the other in Acts. But even more than that, even more than how Judas died, we talked about what is important is the fact that they were both by his own hand.

I'd suggest the contrast between Judas and Peter is tremendously important. Both of them had behaved abhorrently in Jesus' last days. Both fulfilled their own self interest rather than that of their beloved teacher. Both were cowards; they were selfish. Neither of them, neither one of them lived the lessons of Jesus. They didn't live what he'd been teaching them for all of those years.

So what is the difference between the two of them? Hope.

Both of them behaved horribly. Both of them destroyed their relationship with Jesus. The difference between the two of them is that Judas let that brokenness define the rest of his life whereas Peter, when the opportunity arose, allowed himself to be forgiven, to be healed, to be redeemed. He may have been in despair after Jesus' crucifixion, but by the time we get to this

final story of the Gospels, Peter allows Jesus' healing and hope to have the last word instead of his own sin and brokenness.

This hope is not a feeling. It's a biblical construct. We often find ourselves in places that are difficult. Maybe we've betrayed someone or broken a relationship in some way. Maybe we're the one who's been abandoned or who's grieving the death of a dream. To be told in those cases to have hope feels hollow, even ingenuine – that we're supposed to feel something that we are not feeling.

Jim Wallis, the evangelical pastor turned author and magazine editor names it this way:

“Hope is not simply a feeling, or a mood, or a rhetorical flourish. It is a choice, a decision, an action based upon faith. Hope is the very dynamic of history. Hope is the engine of change. Hope is the energy of transformation. Hope is the door from one reality to another.”

Wallis goes on:

“Things that seem possible, reasonable, understandable, even logical in hindsight — things that we can deal with, things that don't seem extraordinary to us — often seemed quite impossible, unreasonable, nonsensical, and illogical when we were looking ahead to them. The changes, the possibilities, the opportunities, the surprises that no one or very few would even have imagined, just become history after they've occurred. What looked before as though it could never happen is now easy to understand.

Think of my great-grandmother. Her family moved from Burlington, Wisconsin to Webster, South Dakota in a Conestoga wagon, and I learned of the details of her funeral arrangements via the internet. Think of all of the things that she saw that were impossible. Not just electricity, and telephones, and the internet, and air and space travel, but vaccines, and heart transplants, and knee replacements. And not just those personal things, but a peaceful Europe, the end of Jim Crow.

Wallace lifts up the social power of Biblical hope.

“The nonsense of the resurrection became the hope that shook the Roman Empire and established the Christian movement. The nonsense of slave songs in Egypt and Mississippi became the hope that let the oppressed go free. The nonsense of a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama became the hope that transformed a nation.”

Friends, we're called to be Peter in the Gospel story, not Judas. We're called on to recognize that our sins, and faults, and failings, and those around us, are not the defining factor, are not the last word. We're called to both personal and societal hope: Personal Biblical hope means being able to imagine ourselves being different, our relationships being different, that the hurt, and pain, and brokenness which bind us can be healed. Personal Biblical hope means believing, and then living forgiveness and reconciliation. Societal Biblical hope means putting our time, and energy, and resources into building a world where a child's race, or class, or gender, or sexuality will not “determine their future share of happiness and wellbeing.” Societal Biblical hope means shaping a world where we reward politicians who work together for the common good, rather

than for the feathering of their own nests or the feathering of the nests of their big donors. Societal Biblical hope means creating a culture where the vulnerable are treated as treasured children of God who are to be cherished, and helped, and empowered. Jubilee House is a perfect example of that societal Biblical hope in action.

When I was in grad school, I rode the Chicago Transit Authority every day. And, because I had an almost hour-long commute, I did a lot of my homework on both the bus and the train. I remember sitting at a bus stop one day with a Bible open, when someone who thought he'd be clever walked on past me and whispered to me, "Spoiler alert: he dies." That clever man got it wrong. Sure, Jesus does die, but that's not the moral of the story, that's not the take-away of the book (or at least it's not supposed to be).

Hope is the take-away. There is nothing so broken that God can't do something about it. There's no one so far gone that God can't redeem. Hope is the moral of the story. Hope is God's engine of transformation.

Friends, as we go forth, may we carry that hope in our hearts and into the world. Alleluia and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
John 21:1-19
May 14, 2017