

## *Character and Virtue: Hope*

Romans 5:1-5

March 19, 2023

Way back in March of 2005, I began a seminary internship at Morningside Presbyterian Church in midtown Atlanta. My first assignment was to create a new Sunday morning Bible study. The topic was left entirely up to me, with two important requirements. The first was that this class had to be appealing to the scores of new members who had recently joined the congregation—many of them young professionals choosing a church for the first time as adults. The second requirement was that the class needed to start as soon as humanly possible. Now, that semester, I was enrolled in an enthralling course on Paul's letter to the Romans. We were reading the letter in English and in Greek. We were studying the ancient context in which it was written. We were considering its unrivaled impact on all of Christian theology from Saint Augustine to John Calvin to Karl Barth.

In short, the course was something close to seminary geek heaven. I could not have been more at home. And so, I thought, what better topic for my new Sunday morning class than the letter to the Romans? I could start immediately. The syllabus was already in hand, and surely it would attract crowds of these new, young parishioners, if not drawn by the intern instructor than surely by this catchy title: "Studying Paul's Letter to the Romans." I thought of that myself.

I prepared my notes. I gathered two stacks of Bibles. I arrived early to be sure that the room was comfortable, that three dozen chairs were set just right, and the flip-chart markers were fresh. And then, I waited. And I waited. And twenty minutes later, with three faithful souls in class, I decided it was time to start. Lesson learned. Experience gained. What's an internship for, anyway? The opposite of isolation is connection. The cure to an epidemic of loneliness is

the creation of communities of belonging. And here's the good news in the Church: that is precisely what we are called to do and be together. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus declares his God-given purpose this way: "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

The Letter to the Romans is a weighty theological document. It is not the most accessible of our Biblical texts. If you want to introduce the Bible to someone new to the Christian faith, you're better to start with the Gospel of John or perhaps the Letter to the Philippians. Romans, on the other hand, is an advanced course in the essentials of our faith. And yet all these years later, I remain convinced that the situation into which this letter was written bears a striking resemblance to our own. Consider this. Paul is writing to a community of sophisticated, thoughtful, educated, intelligent, well-meaning people for whom Christian faith was simply not an assumed way of life.

If you were to walk into the office on Monday morning in First Century Rome and announce with passionate zeal, "I have been buried with Christ and raised to new life," you would have been met with the same blank stares and raised eyebrows that would greet you tomorrow morning in Indianapolis (and I suggest you try it). For then, as now, people of class, people of culture, did not wear their faith on their sleeves, and Christian faith itself was a foreign concept. The small band of Jesus followers in that big city struggled to cling to faith in a complicated and sometimes hostile environment. They were looking for a word of hope in a time of despair. And this, behind all the theological concepts and the abstract language, this is what Paul aims to offer. Hope. Hope grounded in faith.

So far, our Lenten sermon series has introduced three tangible, practical virtues. Kindness. Truthfulness. Friendship. Now, they may not be easy to practice, but we know them when we see them. This Sunday, we turn to a virtue that is harder to nail down and more difficult to describe. One of our early worship attendees described it as “squishy,” a virtue that can be dismissed as a wispy feeling or a vacuous emotion. A friend of mine put it concisely this week when I told him the topic for the sermon. He asked, “How do you practice hope?” Perhaps that’s the question at the heart of today’s sermon. How do you practice hope?

We might begin by naming what hope—at least in the theological sense—is not. Christian hope is not a synonym for optimism. This idealistic confidence that everything will work out in the end may be a byproduct of hope, but it does not name the substance of the virtue. In my experience, optimism tends to skate on the surface of experience, bypassing the reality of pain and the certainty of suffering. Hope goes deep—in the words of our Declaration of Faith, plunging us into the struggle, asking for something from us. Hope is not naïve.

Neither, however, is Christian hope compatible with the kind of cynicism that has overtaken so much of our discourse. We are all encouraged to distrust everything and everyone, from once-venerated institutions to colleagues and classmates to neighbors and even members of our own family. There is a brooding, general lack of faith in the human species, an assumption of the worst in others. Maybe you’ve heard this modern take on the beatitudes of Jesus: “Blessed are the cynical, for they shall not be disappointed.” We have lifted cynicism to the realm of virtue.

The wreckage of this idolatry surrounds us. We see it in diminished expectations for the future among emerging generations. We see it in broken relationships. We see it in the lack of concern for those who will follow us, who will inherit what we pass along. We see it in a general sense of foreboding and pessimism. A few weeks ago, columnist David French wrote an essay reclaiming the original intent

of President Jimmy Carter’s so-called “malaise speech.” The 1979 address was widely panned and even blamed for Carter’s political demise. But French (from the other side of the political aisle) sees in the speech a prophetic word that went unheeded, writing, “The trends [Carter] saw two generations ago now bear their poisonous fruit in our body politic.”

One of those fruits is surely the cynicism that simultaneously produces both selfishness and despair. As Carter said, “We have learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.” Have we learned that lesson?

I believe this is the quality that distinguishes the virtue of hope from airy optimism or tempting cynicism: purpose. *Purpose.*

Ultimately, hope that is not anchored to something more sturdy than human ability or enterprise will succumb to the battering reality of life in a broken world. True hope must rest on a deeper sense of meaning, a firmer foundation of faith, a greater sense of purpose

And this was the Apostle Paul’s message to the Romans. Hope does not disappoint us when hope is tethered to God’s presence, to God’s power. It was Václav Havel—the poet and statesman whose own life was characterized by suffering and periods of deep despair—who could still write these words: “Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit...It transcends the world that is immediately experienced. It is anchored beyond our horizons.”

Without a sense of transcendence, true hope will always elude us. Yes, we can do much good. We can celebrate many successes. We can effect change and accomplish genuine improvement simply by relying on our goodness and ingenuity, but these efforts will never be enough on their own. We cannot create the kingdom of God. We are creatures and not the creator. And if our vision is limited to human endeavor, the result will always be disappointment.

When our hope is rooted in this transcendent faith, we can pursue with passion the work that is ours to do, trusting that it will always be incomplete because only God is sufficient. We can practice selfless service. We can give with generous hearts. We can listen with an open mind. We can speak the truth in love. We will be filled with an irrepressible energy that is not contingent on the immediate success of our efforts. We can be a people fully immersed in a faith that we did not create and a grace that we cannot achieve. True hope will come as gift. As *gift* from God.

How do we practice hope? What does hope look like in our lives and in our church? Remember that virtues are cultivated over time and deepened by repetition. Let me then suggest that hope is a discipline. It involves a kind of dogged determination to trust even when we can see God's grace least clearly.

When I think of hope, particularly hope as irrepressible energy that comes as a gift of God, I think of our son Benjamin who turned six last Friday. Ben exists in my life as a constant reminder of the spiritual gift of hope and the irrepressible energy of a child. A few weeks ago, on a very dark and very cold morning, I woke Ben up as I do on many mornings, trying to gently rouse him from sleep and move him through the morning routine as efficiently as possible. There are eighteen minutes between his wake up and when the bus arrives in front of our house, and we need to make the most of every single one of those eighteen minutes. When he finally opened his eyes, his first words were, "Dad, is it Friday?" In the interest of efficiency, I briefly considered lying to my son to get him out of bed, but I decided to tell him the hard truth. "No, buddy. I'm sorry. Today is Wednesday." Ben sat straight up in bed and declared, "Oh. Well, that's okay. Wednesday is another one of my favorite days."

Friends, the circumstances of our lives do not have to dictate the character of our hope. We can anchor our

confidence in the reality of God's presence. We can practice hope by looking everywhere for signs of it.

While a resident chaplain at a children's hospital during seminary, I met a woman, a mother whose five-month-old twins had still not left the hospital. Every morning, no matter how early I arrived, she was there. And every evening, no matter how late I stayed, she was there. Holding her babies. Praying. Crying. Waiting. Pleading. Rituals of compassion. "What gives you strength?" a novice chaplain asked. With a confident smile and eyes that showed wisdom beyond her nineteen years, the mother simply responded, "I see a new day coming."

This is our hope. Amen.