

Pentecost 2
Romans 5:1-8
6/14/2020

Sermon by The Rev. Lex Breckinridge

Is there a difference between optimism and hope? What do you think? I'm by nature a generally optimistic person. I generally think the world is improving, that things will be better rather than worse. Now, my optimism sometimes – maybe more than sometimes – doesn't work out. This or that thing doesn't turn out to have improved tomorrow over what it was yesterday. But I guess it's always going to be my nature to be optimistic.

How about you? Take a moment and think about it. Are you generally optimistic or pessimistic? Do you generally expect the future to turn out well or badly? If you're a certain age, you may recall the cartoon ship, L'il Abner. There was a character whose name I can't recall who walked around with a rain cloud perpetually over his head. Nothing good ever happened to him and he didn't expect it to. He was the eternal pessimist.

Now, optimism and pessimism both have their uses. Optimism, if it doesn't lead to rash behavior, can invite us to take risks. Pessimism, if it doesn't paralyze us, can invite caution and prudence.

Hold that thought for a minute and let's turn to our reading this morning from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. He's writing to a community that is under siege. They are experiencing persecution and oppression at the hands of the state. Just a few years before this letter was written, in about 54 AD, Jewish Christians had been expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius. While his successor, Nero, had allowed them to return, the state viewed them and their Gentile Christian friends with deep suspicion. So it was no easy thing to be a Roman Christian and it's into this context that Paul writes to them. And it's into his context, a beleaguered minority community, that Paul writes to encourage hope.

Let's stop and say a word about hope. The reason I went on and on a minute ago about optimism is that hope and optimism are often assumed to be identical. "I hope I win the lottery." "I hope the Saints win the Super Bowl." That's not really hope. That's wishful thinking. Optimism and its opposite pessimism are beliefs about the future. Optimists expect the future to be an improvement over the present. Pessimists expect it will turn out badly. Hope and its opposite, despair, are all about the present. Hope holds that the present moment is worthwhile. The present moment contains goodness. Hope says, "How can I be part of this goodness?" Despair says it's all pointless, so why bother. So an optimist plants her garden assuming the rains will come, the sun will shine, the plants will grow, and the harvest will be good. The hopeful person plants without having to know what will happen. The *possibility* of the harvest is worth creating the garden. It's the act of planting itself, without having to know the outcome, that's the great act of hope.

So what we hear Paul say this morning to the beleaguered community in Rome is about the present moment. They, like all who trust in God's promises in Christ, are justified – meaning set right – by faith, so that "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have obtained access to this peace in which we stand." Peace isn't about the absence of conflict. Peace is

about connection and solidarity with God and with others. Knowing that we come from God and we'll return to God – and so will our neighbors, the ones who look like us and the ones who don't look like us – that's true peace. Peace in the midst of the storm and the turbulence. And we stand in that peace – you see how it's all grounded in the present? We stand in that peace and we *boast* in our *hope* of sharing the glory of God. Standing in peace, we have hope.

Now, here comes the real counterintuitive part. We not only boast in our hope, we boast in our suffering. What? I mean, come on, who wants to suffer? Not me, that's for sure. But here is a profound spiritual truth. Real, lasting transformation for persons, for institutions, for systems, most often occurs through great suffering. It's the story the prophets tell, it's the story that Jesus tells, it's the story that Paul tells. Our foundations have to shake and maybe crumble, the walls erected for defense have to be torn down, before light and new life can enter in. Check it out in your own life. The most mature, grounded, self-aware, *wise* people I know reflect this chemical chain reaction that Paul describes. Suffering produces patience and patience produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Who can deny that we are in a time of great suffering? Physical and societal and systemic diseases have been exposed like never before. So we as Christians have a choice before us. We can live in hope or we can live in despair. Despair will inevitably lead to paralysis. "It's all going to hell, there's nothing we can do, so who can I blame?" Hope – redemptive hope in Christ – will lead us to act.

And for me, a 68 year old white male, born into relatively modest economic circumstances, which nevertheless carried with it every perk and privilege of a culture built to provide advantages to people just like me, a next step for me, not the only step but a very important one, is to recognize how different my experiences and expectations and advantages are from, say, and African American man of the same age. We may live in the same country, we may speak the same language, we may worship the same God, but significant parts of our world views will inevitably be different. Here's an example, of what I'm talking about. It was written yesterday by a friend in Austin. He's a college professor and a theologian, but most importantly, he's a husband, a dad, and a Christian. He writes:

As I pulled up in front of the house yesterday and started unloading, a car pulled into our cul de sac. Not too close, but close enough to know they were waiting on me. As I bumped the door closed, my hands full, I saw a black man in his thirties standing at the door of a pickup truck, a boy about Sophie's age in the passenger seat.

He asked me if this was 7905, our address, and I said yes.

Then he stepped from the door of his truck, his hands raised a little, palms toward me, and stopped some distance away, further than required by social distancing.

He told me his name, the name of his son, said he attended Doss Elementary School with our Sophie.

"We're here to pick up his class t-shirt," he said.

I realized all of a sudden that all of this – the posture, the detailed explanation, the distance, even his waiting to address me until I had gathered all my things from the car – was to put me at ease. To let me know he belonged in my neighborhood. That he was not a threat of some sort.

And I was stricken. "Of course," I said. I nodded. "I think I saw a bag with your name on it on the front porch." My hands were full, but I motioned with my head. "Come on up."

We walked together toward the front door. He picked up the bag, smiled at me. On the way back, he stopped in the driveway, turned back toward me.

"Have a blessed day," he said.

Then he climbed in the truck and handed the bag to his son, who excitedly pulled his t-shirt out, and I went into the house.

I did not feel blessed. I felt wrecked.

Two dads who love their fifth-grade graduates.

One white, one black.

Two very different experiences, and two very different lives.

I am haunted by his hands, slightly raised, in plain view, I mean no harm.

By his son, watching the entire interaction, learning probably for the thousandth time how a black man has to act to make clear he is not a danger.

*By the fact that I never ever felt the need to give my two sons *The Talk*, the conversation in black families about how a young black man can maximize his chances to come home alive and unharmed.*

And I am haunted that I am only now in my life recognizing in ways large and small how people of color are forced to compensate in ways I have never noticed because I have never had to.

So here's my work. If I'm to live grounded in hope, grounded in Christ centered hope, my first step is to repent. "But wait a minute, Lex, you didn't do anything wrong. It's not your fault that you were born white in post-war America." Whether or not that's right, it's beside the point. When Jesus called his listeners and his disciples and the religious authorities and the crowds to repent, he didn't necessarily have specific acts or non=acts in mind. Most things we do that we shouldn't do are all symptoms of an underlying disease called sin, separation from God. Jesus' call to repentance is a call to change. In the Greek in which the Gospels are written, Jesus uses the word "metanoia" which gets translated as repentance. It literally means "turn around." "Change." Turn your life around. Wake up. Grow up. To repent is to be called to the grace-filled humility that allows me to see the other as he sees himself, to have the character to acknowledge not only my own brokenness but the brokenness of a culture which has benefitted me at the expense of others who don't look like me. And then to be in prayerful discernment about how I can do my part to bring lasting change so that all of us – every single one of us made in the image of and likeness of God – might flourish and thrive.

Here's how my friend concludes his story:

I can't believe I have been asleep my whole life.

A couple of years ago Vann Newkirk and I were onstage at Washington National Cathedral, and he was telling us about Dr. King's last Sunday sermon, preached from the Canterbury Pulpit just behind

us. Dr. King had related the tale of Rip van Winkle, who fell asleep and awakened in a world that had completely changed.

“Don’t sleep through a great revolution,” was Dr. King’s message, and I guess it is also mine today.

And also this. I offer it in love, with regret, with thanks, in hope: “Have a blessed day.”

May that Holy One of Blessing give us the strength and courage to change.”