

NO TIME FOR CASUAL FAITH
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS ~ *Boris Novak*

Between two words, choose the quieter one.
Between word and silence, choose listening.
Between two books, choose the dustier one.
Between the earth and the sky, choose a bird.
Between two animals, choose the one who needs you more.
Between two children, choose both.
Between the lesser and the bigger evil, choose neither.
Between hope and despair, choose hope; it will be harder to bear.

Choosing hope, let us enter into this sacred time together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Roslyn Rutabaga and the Biggest Hole on Earth* ~ Marie-Louise Gay
(A young rabbit dreams of seeing a penguin, so she starts digging holes in hopes of reaching the South Pole, and finds there are many obstacles in her way.)

READING *Blessing of Hope* ~ Jan Richardson

So may we know
the hope
that is not just
for someday
but for this day –
here, now,
in this moment
that opens to us:

 hope not made
 of wishes
 but of substance,

 hope made of sinew
 and muscle
 and bone,

 hope that has breath
 and a beating heart,

 hope that will not
 keep quiet
 and be polite,

 hope that knows
 how to holler

when it is called for,

hope that knows
how to sing
when there seems
little cause,

hope that raises us
from the dead –
not someday
but this day,
every day,
again and
again and
again.

MESSAGE

MESSAGE

I once met with someone who was disillusioned with their congregation, which happened to be the one I was serving. Of course, this was of great concern to me, and I wanted to understand their experience and their disappointment. “You and the people here,” they said, “have your heads in the sand. You think you can change the world. You believe that things will get better.”

Well, I hadn’t heard that as a criticism before...so I wanted to know more.

“The truth is,” they continued, “the world is going to hell in a handbasket, and the sooner we face that reality, the better off we’ll be.”

I wondered aloud how exactly we would be better off, and in further conversation, I came to understand that they believed it is better to live without hope than to go through life clueless and naïve...that ‘facing reality’ required a kind of defeatism. I now knew why they were disillusioned with the congregation. They were disillusioned with everything.

I am reminded of the work of Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist and a Holocaust survivor; I know that many of you have read his “Man’s Search for Meaning.” When Frankl reflected on his time in the concentration camp, he realized that the people who survived were not necessarily the ones you might expect...and he wondered what it was that enabled them to hang on. His research led him to the conclusion that the difference between those who survived and those who didn’t was hope. Those who survived never gave up believing that despite their current circumstances, their lives had meaning and purpose, and that things would get better.¹

Another story...and I believe that I’ve told you this one before...In 2004, I visited Israel and Palestine with a group from my seminary. There, we met with people and organizations doing peace work, who are trying to heal and build relationships in a reality where so much is broken.

¹ <https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/hope/>

We visited a YMCA...a very different place than the Peterborough Y. There, the work is about rehabilitation for children and others who have been traumatized by war...both physically and emotionally. Working in an old and substandard building, they attempt to provide a safe place for survivors of violence, many of them with disabilities, and they told us stories both of courage and of bitter despair. I was brought face to face with my privilege...my assumption that a 'Y' is a place of recreation and pleasure. And so I asked what it was that made them keep going? How was it that they were able to return to this work day after day?

Their answer was simple and humbling. They said that when one's back is up against the wall, when the choice is literally between death or life, the only choice is life...a choice to keep working, to keep trying, to keep choosing hope.

As Meredith alluded to earlier, hope sometimes gets a bad rap. It is often used flippantly or in a Pollyanna kind of way, and as such, it appears naïve, ill-informed, and irrational. And yet...given the choice of living with hope, or living without hope, which will we choose?

To answer that question, we might need to understand hope's potential effect on us. There are times when it is only a hollow platitude, and times when it is used very effectively as comfort. There are times when it is used as a synonym for wishful thinking, and there are times when it is an honest cry for a deeply needed change. The question for me, and maybe for you, is how we can use hope to enhance our living and also to assist us in having some impact on what is to come. I happen to believe hope can do both of those things.

Jurgen Moltmann is a German theologian who is quoted on the first page of this month's theme packet. In his book "Theology of Hope,"² he explores the basis of hope in Christian thought. While I don't hold his beliefs, for me, his theories are sound. The existence of hope, he says, "awakens a thirst and hunger for life..." Hope makes us dissatisfied with what is, and impels us to look for a future in which more life...in all of its abundance...will enter.

Moltmann wrote this (although I edited out the exclusive language): "...hope causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself the unquiet heart. Those who hope...can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it ...The goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."

We don't have to look far to find that with which we can no longer put up. World politics, environmental devastation, the opioid epidemic, our need for true reconciliation, the oppressive realities of white colonialist culture, the refugee crisis, the continuing persecution of GLBTQ2 persons around the world, and, and, and...

December 6th is our National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women. (And I offer a trigger warning here.) Perhaps like me, you are being deeply affected by the increasing number of allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct. Every day, it seems, a new public figure is named... Matt Lauer, Israel Horowitz, John Conyers, Roy Moore, Al Franken, John Lasseter, Harvey Weinstein, Jeremy Piven, Kevin Spacey, Dustin Hoffman, Russell Simmons, Louis C.K., Charlie Rose, Garrison Keillor...not to mention the many who have gone before...Clarence Thomas, Bill Clinton, Woody Allen, Bill Cosby...

² <https://www.amazon.ca/Theology-Hope-Tp-Jurgen-Moltmann/dp/0800628241>

The truth is that as many as one in three women in North America have been sexually assaulted or will experience some kind of sexual violence.³ If we include sexual harassment, misconduct, innuendo, inappropriate behaviour...well, it's unlikely that any woman has not experienced this in her life. (And, of course, it is not only women who are victims of sexual violence.)

Friday's Washington Post said this: "If the church is not talking about these issues from the pulpit, in small groups, with our children, in staff situations, then we join the list of predatory forces in the world. Our silence makes us complicit."⁴ And beyond talking about it from the pulpit, the article goes on to insist that religious communities have clear sexual harassment policies, as well as tangible means of support for victims of sexual violence.

What does this have to do with hope? Well, I believe that the current culture of 'me too' is a much needed outburst from the hopeful and unquiet heart...from that place where we say 'something has to change'...'this has got to be better'...'we can and should do better than this.' While the news continues to expose one after another of our idols as having taken advantage of someone, and the reality of the pain they have inflicted weighs heavy, I also feel hopeful. It seems to me that things are going to change. As a culture, we are no longer willing to look the other way, or to give those in power the space to act out, or to brush things off as 'just locker room talk.' If we held no hope that things could change, there would be no reason for any woman to speak out and to subject herself to the scrutiny that going public brings.

Things must, and will, be different.

In a recent pastoral letter from Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I found these words, and my title for today:⁵

"This is no time for a casual faith. The heartbreak, anger, and fear of this increasingly repressive time are real. The losses for individuals and communities are real – in particular, communities of color, immigrants, trans people, people living with disabilities.... The losses are real for all those impacted by the natural disasters caused by climate change. In this time, we need strong and healthy religious communities where we can bring our heartbreak and our anger – beloved communities of connection and ritual that help us build resiliency and courage. Strengthening our commitment to our communities builds a foundation for brave and loving ministry and action..."

This is no time for a casual faith. This is no time for casual hope. This is no time to ignore the power of a community of connection. This is no time to imagine that we are in this alone.

We cannot allow reality...and its very real dangers and fears and losses and heartbreaks...to be the reason we lose hope. Rather, realities such as these are exactly what require hope, hope which calls us forward toward ever widening circles of love and justice and inclusion and understanding.

³ <https://www.sexassault.ca/statistics.htm>
<http://sacha.ca/resources/statistics>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/12/01/what-churches-must-do-right-now-to-stop-being-part-of-the-sexual-harassment-problem/?tid=ss_tw-bottom&utm_term=.c6d584665432

⁵ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/practice-our-faith>

I know I'm speaking in a pretty high-falutin way here, with lofty visions of what could be. Let me take just a moment to speak to your hearts, because this needs to be a place where we can bring our real heartbreak and our real anger. Our real fear.

Now, you know me to be stalwart and steady, and because of that, you may think I don't experience hopelessness or despair. But I can, and sometimes I do. It's only human. Our daily lives give us all kinds of things to get depressed, or fearful, or anxious about. Digging holes only to have to fill them back in again. The feeling that you'll never be good enough. Dreams that have come crashing down. Thinking you're alone. Worrying that you have hurt someone and the relationship is irreparable. Imagining that your life is meaningless and that you don't really matter to anyone. Facing a health crisis. Grieving a great loss. Sick and tired of your inability to overcome some bad habit. Ashamed of your body. Wondering if the efforts you make are worth it. Experiencing environmental sensitivities that make you weary and sick. Feeling knocked down by yet another unforeseen or random obstacle. Imagining that the megalith that is white supremacy will never be toppled. Once more tripping up when trying to build relationships across cultures. Shall I go on? How can we find hope in the midst of all of this?

In their book "Active Hope"⁶, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone speak of a particular kind of hope...a hope that is active. They say that hope is a practice...something we do rather than have... and that it involves three steps. First to clearly see reality (not to have our heads in the sand); second, to identify the direction we want to go in or the values we want to express; and third, to take steps to move ourselves in that direction. Active hope is about choosing what we aim to bring about!

Active hope refuses to let the 'hopeless' story have the last say. It requires us to put our energy behind the creative possibilities that can, and must, emerge. Active hope seeks transformation... something that Joanna Macy has called the Great Turning.

Can you feel that Great Turning moving in you? What if you could feel its presence and possibility? Can you believe that we have the capacity to act for the sake of life itself?

Hope changes us, I think. Hope is not naïve, nor is it irrational. It gives us new eyes, new energy, new ideas, new vision. It makes us blessedly dangerous. It allows us to step away from feeling that our backs are up against the wall. As Parker Palmer has said, "when a door closes, the rest of the world opens up."

This is no time to consider that all the doors are closed. This is no time for a casual faith. May hope help us to find joy in the struggle even as we wrestle with what it means to be human. May we choose to see possibility. And may we hold one another in community...a community of active hope.

So be it. Amen.

READING

The Gates of Hope

~ Victoria Safford

⁶ https://www.amazon.ca/Active-Hope-without-Going-Crazy/dp/1577319729/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1512247544&sr=1-1&keywords=active+hope

Whatever our vocation, we stand, beckoning and calling, singing and shouting, at the gates of Hope. This world and our people are beautiful, and we are called to raise that up--to bear witness to the possibility of living with the dignity, bravery, and gladness that befits a human being. This may be what it is to "live our mission."

Matthew Fox writes of "the small work in the Great Work," the place in your little life and love, daily days and earnest effort as a solitary person within the larger Life and larger Love that some call Holy, some call God, some call History, and others call simply larger than themselves. Like everybody else, we are doing small work within the Great Work of creation, and thus do we aid it and abet it in unfolding.

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope--not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; not the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; not the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); not the cheerful, flimsy garden gates of "Everything is gonna be all right." But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about our own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see.

CLOSING WORDS

~ *L. R. Knost*

Do not be dismayed by the
brokenness of the world.

All things break.

And all things can be mended.

Not with time, as they say,
but with intention.

So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally.

The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.

Go in peace and love and be the light that you are. Amen.