

January 19, 2003

## **“YOU GOTTA HAVE HOPE!”**

“...and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts

through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.” Romans 5:5

A few years ago our family was up in New York City and for some unknown reason, probably the availability of tickets, we decided to take in the revival of the Broadway musical Damn Yankees, with Jerry Lewis in the starring role. It was nice. The words, “You gotta have heart” appear as the title of its best known song, as the manager of the Washington Senators tells his players that to be a championship team they must include more than just the ability to play the ball game. They have to have “heart”! As you can see almost in any recent football game, while talent counts, and the most talented team normally wins, in addition, the coach and manager says, sings, ...”you gotta have heart”, i.e., you gotta have the drive, the determination, the fortitude, the endurance, the “let’s keep on going in spite of our misfortune,” or “in spite of the referees” who seem to be mortal, “in spite of injuries,” if we have the “heart” to win, we will! You gotta have heart!

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Well, you could probably live on happily forever without ever seeing Damn Yankees or hearing the Washington manager go through his musical pep talk song about how to gear up to win the game. But the song led to this sermon; it got me to thinking. And even with four tickets at \$80 each, it was worth it. If I get a sermon idea out of any occasion, I count it worthwhile. For, I was pondering, what other things can you think of or name which “you gotta’ have” in order to get through life and in the end win the game? The answers are a mile and a quarter long. Like, you gotta have love. You need love to live. You gotta have a purpose and a direction in which you are heading or you get nowhere at all. You gotta have friends, especially if you have no family. You gotta have faith, hopefully faith in God, but at least the faith to believe that it is all worth the effort and that the universe is compatible with our highest hopes. And, you gotta have health, without which you would not live with gusto. You gotta have food and water, too, and lodging to get into out of the cold. What else would you say you gotta have in the passing days and decades of this mortal life?

The answer of course will depend on what you have and what you want and how you intend to spend your time and energy before your days on earth are through. For today, however, and especially for this sermon, I offer you my answer, not to be exclusive, not even to claim the top spot on your list, but I say it this way: You gotta have ... hope! “You gotta have hope.” So what do we mean by hope, you might be asking?

The modern meaning often is tinged with shades of uncertainty, wishful thinking and personal issues. “Oh I hope Charlie calls me for the prom” or “I hope to win the lottery.” Or “I hope the preacher doesn’t talk too long for my roast is in the oven!” The Biblical understanding is much different, much deeper. Included there are expectations of the future trust in attaining it, patience while waiting confident in The Divine promise.

The Oxford Companion to the Bible defines hope as “an attitude toward the future, an assurance that God’s promise will be kept, a confidence that what is bad will pass and that what is good will be preserved. Hope is a theme in many places in the Bible, even when the specific words for hope are not used.” Sometimes it means “to wait” the root word of hope means to flee for protection to take refuge, to put trust in. “Trust” and “Hope” are very close in meaning.

“Generally speaking, there is in the Bible a growing pessimism that God’s promises will be kept within historical time: this is most clearly seen in the apocalyptic writings...language that had been used to articulate hope for this world is now projected into a world beyond human experience. The promised land becomes a heavenly home; food and water become heavenly food and the water of life; the Messiah becomes a divine being; heaven and hell are the final solution to the problem of justice; communities broken by death and tragedy and sin can be restored in heaven. In spite of the failures and disillusionments of this life, there is still hope. God will win the heavenly battle. There will be resurrection, life after death, and a new age where God reigns.” (p. 290) God will provide what we need.

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Do you recall the Greek mythological story of Pandora’s Box? We normally begin and end our use of the phrase by referring to a whole host of bad and evil things that will come if we open up a thorny problematic issue. That’s true.

But the whole story of Pandora has to do with hope. Pandora was a princess in ancient Greece . She was presented with a grand but mysterious box, so grand it made the other gods jealous. She was so beautiful they were jealous of her already. She was told she was never to open the box, for while it was an object of beauty on the outside, inside of it were cooped up and captured some of the opposite powers of evil and trouble. Well, curiosity killed the cat and it also got the best of Pandora. She yielded to temptation, and one day she opened the box.

Then follows our bad association with Pandora’s Box. She lifted the lid just a tiny bit to take a quick peek, when all of a sudden a whole panorama of difficult afflictions were released: disease, depression, madness, poverty and penury and woe. She couldn’t close it in time, by herself. But a compassionate god helped her to close the box just in time to keep her from losing the one antidote with which she could use to overcome all the others. It was said “That with it she could make life’s miseries bearable.” The one particle of that powerful goodness was “hope.”

Someone wrote that “Hope is more than a sunny view that everything will turn out right. Hope is believing that you have the will and the way to accomplish your goals and to survive life’s demands, whatever they may be.” You gotta have hope.

Emil Brunner the widely known Neo-Orthodox Theologian of the last century once wrote “What oxygen is to the lungs” (you cannot breathe or live without it) “What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to the meaning of human life.” It is.

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The Book of Romans is far and away the greatest theological book ever written: period, full stop, 10-4, over and out! The best theological book ever written. It is the Magnum Opus of St. Paul , the Zenith of the entire Bible, out rivaling everything before or since. It is deep and good. It lays out the theology of the Christian faith. Consequently it might overwhelm you some of the time. It is easy to read, but it is not an easy book. Its impact on the Christian church over the centuries is incalculable.

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Romans 5:1-5 is one of Paul’s most lyrical passages of the book, in which he offers us his personal conclusion, discovered after a whole host of competing ideas. It tells the intimate joy of his enduring confidence in God.

It begins, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1) That became the touchstone of the reformation in the sixteenth century. It is the most important section of the letter to the Romans, if not anywhere in all of Paul’s letter. It is a summary of the character and qualities of the new life. “Having been” justified (forgiven, accepted) we have “Peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

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Let’s look at Paul’s development a little more closely: he writes,

I. We rejoice in our sufferings. Fitzmyer translates those words: “Let us boast in our afflictions” or “we take pride in our difficulties.”

Rejoice in our sufferings – at first I want to say “Oh, come on Paul. What does that mean?” Bodily sufferings are not normally the occasion for rejoicing.

Way back when I was a student at the University of Pittsburgh , we had a Chaplain named Emory Luccock. He stood at the front door to the Fifth Avenue entrance to the Cathedral of Learning, greeting any and all who came through the revolving doors with a huge grin and a slap on the back. Even when it was raining or snowy, he would shout “Great day in the morning, aren’t you happy to be alive!” He knew

me by name and so he expanded his grin and the volume of his larynx when I entered in from the cold. Some days I pretended to be happy, although I wanted to bop him on top of his head.

The explanation of what St. Paul means is not in Chaplain Luccock's attitude to the world. Justification and our acceptance by Christ can be a prelude to spiritual and moral growth, beyond the anticipation of hope. The expectations of future good can go hand in hand with the acceptance of present hardship.

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“We rejoice in our sufferings.” Paul knew what he was talking about. In II Corinthians 11:24-29; it says, “Five times I have received forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned (with rocks!) Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure: And, apart from other things, there is a daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?”

II Corinthians 12:7-10 adds; “And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” He gave up his family, his childhood faith. He was alone without anyone at all.

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II. Two, “We rejoice in our sufferings, for sufferings produce endurance.” Suffering does not in itself strengthen endurance. When Nietzsche wrote that whatever does not kill you, strengthens you, he was not echoing Paul. However, Nietzsche touches a familiar chord. I once told a young woman what Nietzsche wrote. She sighed and said “Oh, but Reverend Cromie, I'm strong enough already!”

What improvement comes when we suffer, if it does come, depends entirely not on the suffering but in the way we handle it. When Henley was lying in the Edinburgh Infirmary with one leg amputated and the prospect for other amputations sure to follow, he wrote his famous poem Invictus:

“Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be,  
For my unconquerable soul.”

“We hope to share in the glory of God” Paul writes, but meanwhile there is trouble and all kinds of pressure. Watch his logic – his development: “We rejoice in sufferings.” And, suffering produces endurance. The Greek word he uses means not only endure, which in our language often hints of a negative, “Just endure it. Put up with in!” It also means to embrace the chance to overcome it.

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III. Then, endurance produces character. What does that mean? The Greek word Paul uses was dokime. It was a word used of metal which has been passed through the fire and everything unwanted had been purged out of it. It was purified, like sterling silver, or pure gold.

“When endurance meets affliction head on, a man, or woman, emerges stronger and purer and better and nearer to God.” Albert Schweitzer once wrote of “The fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain.” You do not have to mention it or ask, you can see it in their eyes and the soul.

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We heard a lovely concert the other night at the Palm Beach Atlantic University in the new Vera Lee Rinker Building recital hall. Anne Oland from Denmark played four sonatas, fifteen movements of Beethoven. It was wonderful, demanding but wonderful. Yet at one moment, while Ms. Oland was literally pounding out the crescendo of a Beethoven adagio, exhausting her poor fingers and her poor psyche, I began to think about Ludwig Van Beethoven who composed these pieces over two centuries ago. He was a prolific composer. Those were four of thirty two piano sonatas and over one hundred compositions in sonata form, including the Nine Symphonies.

And all the while he faced the horror of a composer’s worst nightmare, he was going deaf. At the age of twenty-eight it was already clear enough that it gave him grave anxiety. He concealed it from all but a few friends. He went to anyone who could help the deaf, even to those who only said they could heal deafness. He dreaded the loss of his hearing. Only his love of music kept him from suicide. He wrote his final will and testament when he was thirty-two. He soon had to give up playing, then

conducting, but he kept on composing because he said he felt that however cruel life had been, there was still music within him to write.

On March 26, 1827 at the age of fifty-seven, he died, coincidentally during a magnificent horrendous thunderstorm.

But my reference here was not intended to be a lecture on the troubles of Beethoven. Only to tell you that at the height of his fears, when it became clear that he would soon lose all sense of hearing, he shouted, “So be it. I will take life by the throat anyway, and continue to do what I can with what I have left before my days are through...” I will take life by the throat anyway...and continue to do what I can. It is not what you have lost that matters, it is what you have left. Endurance produces character.

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IV. And four, “Character produces hope.” Robert Kennedy once said, “Some see the world and say, “Why?” Others look around and say “Why not?!” Christian hope will not disappoint. “It never proves an illusion for it is founded on the love of God.”

“Character produces hope.” At the beginning of the chapter, verse one, Paul began with an intellectual statement. Now it is fortified by the experience life’s conflicts bring. Hope will not disappoint us. Hope will not disappoint you either.

Victor Frankel once wrote, after his time in the prison camp at Auschwitz, “Those who had hope and something to look forward to were the ones who managed to get by, and they were the only ones who survived.” One commentator said that critical to this growth is the assumption that the world is a friendly place and that the universe, with all of its zigs and zags is still compatible with our highest hopes. In a hostile environment, hardships would break our spirits...but if the world is providentially governed by God, albeit on His terms and in His time, we can manage. Why? Because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

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In conclusion, sometimes it comes down to that doesn’t it? Sometimes you have to live on hope. H-O-P-E. That doesn’t sound like much of a well balanced diet to fulfill your dreams and define your existence. But then I’m here to advise you, it is. “What oxygen is to the human lungs such is hope for the meaning of human life.” To live on hope sounds risky doesn’t it? But sometimes, it is all you really have to live on.

Hope that the present difficulties will pass; hope that the children will grow up; hope that your husband will straighten out; hope that the wife will be forgiven; hope

that a new relationship will work or that you can forget an old one; hope that friends will understand when you get off track. Sometimes if you get locked in the problems of the present you can walk about in a fog. You need to look beyond.

So think of it as a deep and moving river. Allow the overflowing kindness of God to carry you through the trials and fears and broken dreams you have...because He will, you know, He will. "He rescued me," said Paul, "He rescued me, and I live my life in the hope that He will rescue me again."

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There is a lovely story of Thomas a'Kempis who is in the honored group of that top handful of theologians of all the centuries. His was the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. He was a Roman Catholic scholar and German mystic. But one day his life caved in. This time it was illness, but life can cave in in a lot of different ways. Anyway, he wrote, "I cried out to God, 'O Lord, how will I ever make it through this?' Then I heard a little voice whispering back to me," he wrote, 'Thomas'; 'Yes'; 'Did I ever fail you? When you were a little child, did I not carry you in my arms? When you faced the passions of your youth, did I not deliver you from all their might? In the reigning view you had over the top of your middle years, and when you walked too near the fire,...have I ever failed you, Thomas? Have I ever let you down?' Thomas said meekly, "No." The voice of God said, "Well then, what makes you think that I would fail you now?"

Thomas said, "No, no, no Lord...you have delivered me and...you will deliver me." And the Bible adds, "I have placed my hope in Him that He will deliver me again." And aye, He will. You cannot live without a renewal of your faith. Whatever that means to you in the little world where you live and dream, I encourage you to renew your faith. You cannot live without giving and receiving love. But also, "You gotta have hope" for now and forevermore, Amen.

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