

The Message for Sunday, May 30, 2010

Title: “Living Through It”

Scripture: Romans 5:1-5

I. Hope... This past week, I have had one of those nasty, summer colds. I think it is about over; or, I hope it is. We have all been there. It starts with a little tickling in the throat. Then comes the cough, followed by sleepless nights and constant interruptions in work. We feel lousy, fatigued, and listless.

Most of us have been through it enough times to know that we just have to live through it. Sooner or later, it will ease up; and then one day, we will wake up and will not cough or sneeze.

When I first got the cold, I told myself, “Just hang on. You know it won’t last long. Sooner or later, you’ll be back to health.” And, as always, I’m right. Eventually, my cold dwindles away. I have never been disappointed.

II. Does not disappoint... Today, every Christian knows about Paul. We have his letters and know of his call and his ministry through the Book of Acts. Some of us are fortunate enough to have traveled to a few of the ancient cities connected with Paul. But, in the early days of the church, Paul was little more than a rumor.

Historic tradition tells us that Peter founded the Church in Rome sometime around 40 A. D. We also know the church was a Greek speaking congregation that continued to grow in influence. Paul wanted to visit that church on his way to what is now called Spain. So, he felt it important to write them a letter of introduction.

The letter to the Church at Rome it is the longest letter Paul ever wrote. That is why the ancient church placed it first. But, just because it is long does not make it the most important letter Paul ever wrote. What makes it important is that Paul presents his doctrine of Justification by Faith.

He was masterful in how he laid it all out for the Christians in Rome. But, even on the best of days, Paul was very wordy. And, because he wrote with such enthusiasm, he is sometimes difficult to comprehend at first sight. For that reason, a reader can be overwhelmed by Paul’s rhetoric and extended theological reasoning.

What we sometimes miss are the little jewels in between his massive, theological presentations. Such is the case with the opening verses in the 5th chapter. Everyone remembers what Paul wrote here: “Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” But, the real jewel is something Paul said at the end of that phrase.

The verse hit me profoundly; and that is why the Bible is called, “The Living Word of God.” It speaks in new and exciting ways every time we read it with an open and inquiring heart.

The little jewel reads, “Hope does not disappoint us.”

III. Ancient hope... Hope has always been a major ingredient of the Christian faith; and so we almost take it for granted. But in Paul’s day, hope was a rare item. Retired pastor and professor, Warren Wiersbe, says in his book, *Be Ready*, that a typical

inscription on a grave in Paul's day might read, "I was not/ I became/ I was not/ I am not/ I care not." (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, p. 83; quoted at www.sermonillustrations.com; see also "Some Greek Grave Inscriptions by John M. Mecklin, *The School Review*, Vol. 12, No. 5 [May 1904], pp. 383-389, published by the University of Chicago Press, <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1075841>)

Overall, the populations of many of the ancient cities and towns of the Roman Empire held very little hope. But, to Paul, hope was one of the three major ingredients of the Christian faith. Perhaps, we find ourselves returning to the cynical world into which Paul cast the Christian message.

Writing several decades ago, the French professor and lay theologian, Jacques Ellul (1912-1994), said that "the challenge of the church today is not giving people something to believe in. It is giving people something to hope for." "The Compleat Christian," 6/14/1992, www.homileticsonline.com)

With that in mind, I would like to say these three things about hope.

IV. Without embarrassment... The first thing I want to say is that the church is a place where hope is offered without embarrassment. The original Greek in Paul's Roman letter that is translated, "hope does not disappoint us," literally says, "hope does not put us to shame." Or, it can be translated, "hope does not humiliate us" (κατασχύνω). But, "disappointment" is a good translation because shame and humiliation often lead to disappointment. And yet, it is a fair question to ask, "How does hope lead to disappointment or humiliation? What is there about hope that is embarrassing?"

Have you ever been ridiculed for your positive attitude and conviction that things are going to be o.k. in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary? Have you ever hoped for a child to have a great future, only to see that future squandered by constantly making poor decisions that lead to monumental disappointments?

And yet, we constantly renew our hopes in what are seemingly hopeless situations. Why is that? Why are we not disappointed, embarrassed, even humiliated when we see our hopes dashed?

It is because hope is putting faith to work when doubting would be easier. (anonymous: <http://www.motivational-inspirational-corner.com/getquote.html?categoryid=21>)

Jeanne Boggs from Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania, once wrote to one of those advice columns that appear in newspapers. She asked, "Can you tell me how a person who has a hard time walking without pain can dance and enjoy it? I do feel it for the next few days, but as I normally limp around anyway, I just go ahead. When I hear good music, I can't sit still. What's the name for a thing like that?"

The advice columnist wrote in her column, "It's called 'a good attitude,' Jeanne. Congratulations." ("Fingerprints of the Soul," 6/11/1995, www.homileticsonline.com)

It is not just a "good attitude." People get good attitudes from having a hope in the goodness of the universe and its Maker. Christ came to give humanity hope: hope in the divine goodness of God, hope in the prevailing goodness of life, and hope in the everlasting goodness of eternity. Our hopes are based on the fact that God ultimately wins.

There is a story of an elderly gentleman who astounded everyone by his cheerfulness in the face of physical ailments, family troubles, and being unable to do some of the

things old age denies. When asked his secret for a cheerful disposition, he replied: “Well, you see, it is like this. The Bible says often, ‘And it shall come to pass.’ It never says, ‘It came to stay.’” (“The Compleat Christian,” 6/14/1992, www.homileticsonline.com)

V. Without delusion... The second thing I want to say is that the church is a place where hope is offered without delusion. We live in an age that has been labeled “postmodern.” Postmodern means a mind that is shaped by pluralities, alternative ways of thinking, and skepticism. It is a kind of dissatisfaction with the current state of everything.

Postmoderns are highly skeptical of explanations that claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, or traditions. Instead, they focus on the relative truths of each individual person. Postmoderns define reality as whatever they interpret reality to be for us. Postmoderns believe that the outcome of their own experiences will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal. Postmodernism denies the existence of any ultimate principles, and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody. (<http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/genloss/postm-body.html>)

Does that general air of skepticism leave you feeling a little skeptical? Well, consider the younger generations, even within the church. Not too long ago, on the way out of church, one of the staff overheard some young people talking about the sermon. For the most part, they liked it, especially the practical suggestions for daily living. But, they referred to some of the matters of faith as “bunk.”

I do not know who said that; and it does not matter. It is symptomatic of a whole generation coming along who believe that way. For most postmoderns, there is a great deal of delusion in faith. The reason they “get away with it” (as it were), is that it gets reinforced practically everywhere they go. And, that is because the closing years of the 20th Century and the opening decade of the 21st Century have seen some fairly disturbing things associated with the church. From evangelists who have been caught in extramarital affairs, to the child abuse issues facing the priesthood, people have had faith challenged, even shattered.

Just this past week, there was a segment on the internet (From “American Greed”) about a church based in Florida that promised a 100% return on money donated to the church. The IRS and state officials in Alabama investigated and discovered what turned out to be a huge Ponzi scheme. They were able to shut down the operation, but not before it had bilked church members out of nearly ½ a billion dollars!

A growing delusion in the church is soon followed by a growing delusion in faith. If that is true, then how can we deliver a fatal blow to delusion? Or, as a postmodern would say, “Can we address the issue of delusion in the church?”

Well, that leads me to the third thing I want to say.

VI. Without limit... I believe that the church is a place where hope is experienced without limit. It has often been said that The Church is only one generation away from extinction. Each generation has to be evangelized with the Gospel of Christ. In spite of the delusions that have arisen out of the 2,000 year history of the church, hope in the

saving grace of Jesus Christ has empowered the consecutive rebirth of the church, generation after generation.

In his book, *The Grace Awakening* (Word, 1990), Charles Swindoll tells a story about President Thomas Jefferson. President Jefferson and a group of companions were traveling across the country on horseback. They came to a river that had left its banks because of a recent downpour. The swollen river had washed the bridge away. Each rider was forced to ford the river on horseback. They would have to fight for their lives by fighting against the rapid currents. It was a real life-and-death situation for every rider.

There, at the crossing, was a traveler who was not a part of the Jefferson party. He stood to one side and watched the first several men plunge into the water with their horses. He saw them struggle to the other side. The stranger then looked to President Jefferson and asked him if he would ferry him across the river. Jefferson agreed without hesitation. The man climbed on, and after a brief struggle, the two men were safely on the other side.

When the stranger slid off the back of Jefferson's horse, one of the riders asked the stranger, "Why did you select the President of the United States to ask this favor?"

The man appeared shocked and admitted that he had no idea he had asked the President of the United States to help him. He said, "All I know is that on some of your faces was written the answer 'No,' and on some of them was the answer 'Yes.' His was a 'Yes' face." ("The Doomsday Church, 10/19/2008, www.homileticsonline.com)

"Hope does not disappoint us." Do you remember what the rest of the verse says? Paul said, "Hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us."

There is nothing esoteric about hope. Hope is not a mere speculative and philosophical quality of the Christian faith. It is not just something we talk about. Christians who have encountered Christ have a "yes face." At no time in modern history is it any more important to live our faith in such a way as to tell the world that there is hope.

The church helps the world experience hope when we adopt a family in near-crisis and help them see beyond the darkness of a threatening disaster. The church helps the world experience hope when we love our neighbors as Christ loved the world—which, by the way is not an option for Christian discipleship. It is what Christ told us to do.

The church experiences hope when it stands with those who face a crisis. It says to them, "Yes, we know life has its disappointments, but in the end, God will have His way. The wrong shall be made right. The faithful shall persevere.

And, the church helps the world experience hope when we have lost a loved one. The community of believers reminds us that death is not the end of life. It is but a mere threshold from one side of life to the other, from the worldly to the eternal. There is no limit to hope if hope is found in Christ.

VII. In the name of Christ... Augustine believed that hope was the best of the three virtues (faith, hope, love). He said that faith only tells us that God is; Love only

tells us that God is good. But hope tells us that God will work His will. (A Lovehope Faith," 2/2/1992, www.homileticsonline.com)

In the name of Christ, I offer you hope—without any embarrassment
disappointment, or shame. In the name of Christ, I offer you hope—with any delusion.
And, in the name of Christ, I offer you hope—without limit. “Hope does not
disappoint.” Amen.

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