

## More Than Wishful Thinking

*Romans 8:22-27*

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Back when Charles Schulz was still alive and penning the “Peanuts” comic strip, he wrote a great one about Lucy and her penchant for dropping fly balls.

In it, Charlie Brown and the gang are out on the baseball diamond. Lucy is in her usual position out in right field, when suddenly a batter hits a fly ball to her. She looks up to catch it, only to have it drop behind her. She picks up the ball and saunters to the pitcher’s mound to give it to Charlie Brown, saying, “Sorry I missed that one, manager, I was hoping I’d catch it! Hope got in my eyes.”

The story of Lucy and her missed fly ball seems appropriate this morning, because it points out the confusion that we sometimes have over what hope really is. Lucy confuses hope with wishful thinking. Wishful thinking says:

“I hope it doesn’t rain this weekend.”

“I hope traffic isn’t too bad.”

“I hope the ball falls in my glove!”

But *real* hope is more than that, isn’t it?

Looking around at the difficulties, the hardships, the injustices, the tragedies of the world, Paul concludes that all creation groans as if in labor pains (Rom. 8:22).

Now I could be wrong, but I don’t think good weather for a weekend barbecue or unexpectedly light traffic is going to get at the heart of what’s wrong with this world. Some things need more than wishful thinking. They need hope.

In Raymond Carver’s short story, “A Small Good Thing,” a young boy named Scotty is hit by a car while walking to school – on the week of his eighth birthday, no less. His mother, Ann Weiss, had already gone to the local bakery and ordered a special cake for the birthday boy.

Up until this moment, everything had seemed right in the world of Ann and Howard Weiss. But that all changed as Scotty was rushed to the hospital. His parents watched helplessly as he slipped deeper and deeper into a coma, until the young boy at last succumbed to death.

There are few pains more acute than the death of a child. It goes against all natural law. Children are supposed to bury their parents, and not the other way around. Such a death changes the world for a parent. It alters their reality permanently.

How does anyone press on under the suffering and weight of such loss?

Julia Samuel, a grief psychotherapist, says that the *paradox of grief* is “that we must find a way to live with a reality that we don’t want to be true” (*Grief Works*, xvii).

Wishful thinking wants a mulligan on reality. It wants to call a “do over.” It wants the dealer to deal an altogether new hand. Wishful thinking wants a magical elixir to take away the pain. But wishing for things to be different will not make it so.

Hope is different than wishful thinking, because hope does not attempt to pass over our reality, but rather it carries us through it. Hope empowers us to live with the reality that we don’t want to be true.

And, more often than not, hope come to us in the day-to-day small gestures of kindness that seem to carry with them the very presence of God.

In the immediate days after Scotty died in that short story, his parents were consumed with grief and anger. The baker who was contracted to make Scotty’s birthday cake, had no know idea what had happened to Scotty, so he had been phoning over and over to get them to come pay for and pick up the cake. It was like salt in the wound for Ann and Howard, so in their grief-induced anger, they decide to confront this callous man who kept calling them demanding payment Scotty’s cake.

When Ann and Howard Weiss arrive at the bakery, the baker learns for the first time what has befallen them. His head drops to his feet, and in a moment of humanity, he looks up and apologizes for the incessant calls. “I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me,” he says. He then invites them to a table, asks them to sit, and pours them coffee. He then finds a rich dark loaf of bread and breaks it open for them. Ann and Howard partake of the rich dark bread, and the baker tells them that eating is a “small good thing,” especially in a time of pain and groaning and waiting for all things to be made right.

In some ways, hope is the very measure of what’s *not* right with the world. We hope for comfort when we are in the midst of discomfort. We hope for health when we are sick. We hope for guidance when we feel lost. We hope for justice when we have experienced injustice. We hope for peace when we are at war. We hope for rest when we are weary. We hope for love when we are lonely.

Hope is what we do when all is not as it ought to be. That’s why, as Paul says, “Hope that is seen is not hope” (Rom. 8:24).

And that makes it notoriously difficult to talk about. So the Bible usually relies on imagery to help us hope for a world as it ought to be: swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, streams flowing in the desert, wolf and lamb lying down together, nations becoming neighbors and neighbors becoming friends and

friends becoming family, God walking with us and wiping away our tears saying, "Death shall be no more."

The promises of God give us the power to hope that all will be set right. "For in hope we were saved," says Paul. And "if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with *patience*" (Romans 8:22, 25).

That word "patience" doesn't quite get to the heart of the matter. In our day and time, patience is more about simple self-restraint and delayed gratification than anything else. All I can hear ringing in my ears is the character, Veruca Salt, from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*: "Daddy, I want it, and I want it *now!*" She is *impatient* because she cannot tolerate any delay in her need for gratification.

But, more often than not, the same Greek word that has been translated as patience here is usually translated not as patience, but as *endurance*. That strikes a different in our ears, doesn't it? While *patience* gives the image of someone sitting on their hands, idly waiting for in line for their turn, *endurance* gives the image of someone running a marathon – someone enduring to the finish

And that's the thing about hope. Hope is determined. Hope is stubborn. Hope doesn't bypass hardship. It *endures* through hardship.

"In her book, *Intensive Care*, Mary-Lou Weisman tells the moving and tragic story of the death of her fifteen-year old son, Peter, from the terrible disease, muscular dystrophy. She tells about an astonishing thing that happened right at the moment of death.

Peter's body was completely paralyzed and in the final stages of his disease, and the delirium of death was taking over in the last few minutes of his life. He was moaning and random and disconnected in his thoughts. His voice, wrote Mary-Lou, sounded so far away, so lost. But then, suddenly, in a surprisingly clear voice, Peter spoke directly to Larry, his father:

'Daddy, what does impudent mean?'

Bewildered and frightened, Larry and Mary-Lou looked at each other. What could this strange question from their dying son possibly mean?

'Daddy, what does impudent mean?'

Even though he had tears streaming from his eyes, Larry answered matter-of-factly: 'Impudent. Impudent means *bold*. I-It means *shamelessly bold*.'

Peter paused for a moment, death closing its grip on him, and then he said, 'Then put me in an impudent position.'

And sure enough, just before he died, Mary-Lou and Larry positioned their son's arms and legs in a posture of bold defiance — an impudent position — in the face of death" (Tom Long, "A Living Hope," July 21, 2010).

Like the images of swords beaten into plows and streams flowing in deserts and wolves lying down with lambs, Peter's story has something to tell us about Christian hope. Christian hope takes a bold posture — an impudent position — over against the powers of death.

It is more than wishful thinking. When Christians use the word hope we mean something different by it. Christian hope is the faith that in a world of violence and warfare and suffering, none of these things gets the last word.

That is because the source of our hope is God.

The Baptist pastor, Stephen Shoemaker, says, "We hope 'in the Lord,' not in princes or professors or priests, not in human power or human knowledge or human goodness. Neither do we believe in some vague notion 'that everything will turn out all right.' We do affirm with Paul 'That in everything *God* works for good with those who love him' (Rom. 8:28), but we do not say it glibly, for we know that we ourselves may never see the good being worked out, at least not now, and never completely in this life. We hope for what we do not see" (*The Jekyll and Hyde Syndrome*, 174).

"Years ago, when Lesley Stahl was the CBS News White House correspondent, there was a late-breaking story involving President Reagan. Lesley scrambled to cover it in time for the broadcast that night, and she managed to file the story barely before the deadline. She did not, however, have time to get a film crew to the White House, so, to accompany her report, she borrowed stock video footage from the White House Office of Communications.

That evening, Stahl gave her report about what had happened at the White House, while on the screen flashed brightly lit pictures of the president standing in front of waving American flags and riding horses through the surf on a California beach. The next day, the head of the White House communications called Stahl to congratulate her on her report. She expressed thanks for the word of encouragement but added that maybe words of thanks were out of place because, after all, her report had been sharply critical of the president.

'Oh yeah,' said the White House official. 'Your words were critical, but you showed *my* pictures. In the battle between the eye and the ear, the eye wins every time'" (Tom Shales, "TV Preview," *Washington Post*, Nov. 22, 1989).

The Christian faith is, in a deep sense, a wager on the truth of the very opposite: that in the battle between what we *see* and the promises of the gospel we *hear*, what we hear prevails.

That's what Paul means when he says, "For in hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:24). So often what we see and what saturates our newsfeeds are stories about the powers of death — greed, hate, and violence. But the promise of the gospel is that none of those things will get the last word — that all will be set right, even if we can't see how.

But does not God leave us groping blindly in the dark. When we squint and look more closely at the world, we can see even now a spring of water in the desert, a ray of light shining even now in the darkness.

Here are people feeding the hungry, there are compassionate caregivers caring for the sick and dying, over there are people pressing for a more just society, and here are teachers serving tirelessly in struggling schools.

There are people of hope in this world who trust God's promises and who live as if they can be brought into reality even now. And when we encounter them, so often their hope becomes our hope.

Father Gregory Boyle was taking Shamika and Abby on a speaking trip to San Francisco on behalf of Homeboy Ministries. He says:

"They're big girls: tattooed gang members that have been in prison. You would not want to mess with these two. They know how to handle themselves."

At the airport, he's finishing up with the woman at the car rental place, when she says, "May I ask, what's Homeboy Ministries?"

Shamika and Abby are both wearing sweatshirts emblazoned with the logo. His own shirt, too, has the logo embroidered on it. He explains that it's a gang intervention and rehab ministry in L.A. "And these two ladies," he explains, "are going to help me give a talk to bunch judges in San Francisco."

"Awesome!" She then adds perkily, "Would you like me to put them down as additional drivers?"

"Are you out of your mind?" he deadpans, but everyone in earshot, including Shamika and Abby, laugh. As they leave, he overhears Shamika say to the rental car clerk, "Thanks for trying."

The next day, he introduces Shamika and Abby to a group of the judges and invites them to tell their stories. He says of the moment: "They are present in their stories, pausing often to cry as they share the terror of their lives: torture, abuse, abandonment, and violence. They both speak of their addictions and that particular pain of having given birth in the midst of them and having their kids taken and raised by strangers. The judges are riveted and, at the end, they applaud. Truly awe came upon everyone."

He says, “We fly home that afternoon. Back in my car in the Burbank airport parking lot, I call my then 87-year old mother to tell her that I’m home – a travel ritual of ours.

‘Tell me again what you were doing in San Francisco?’ she asks.

‘We were giving a talk to a bunch of judges,’ I answer. ‘And these two wonderful women were helping me give a workshop.’

After some more chatting, we say goodbye and I hang up. After a moment, Shamika, sitting in the front seat, lets out a, ‘Huh...’”

“What?” Boyle asks.

“Oh, nothing.”

“No, what?”

“Well, just right now, you called us ‘wonderful women.’”

“Yeah. So?”

Shamika enters some quiet, soulful place. “I don’t know,” she begins slowly. “It’s just that when you say it...” She turns and looks Father Boyle in the eyes. “...I believe you” (Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir*, chapter 5).

See something, say something: *that* is how we spread hope in this world. It doesn’t have to be big. It could just be a little word, a small encouragement – and then the most amazing thing happens. God turns those little words into a small stream in the desert, a little light in the darkness.

Small doesn’t mean weak. One word of hope, one impudent position, one loaf of rich dark bread can make all the difference in the world.

It’s why Paul puts hope in as one of the big three. “Faith, hope, and love,” he says, “these three remain” (1 Cor. 13:13).

Not only do they remain, but in the final assessment, they are the only things that truly matter.

Amen.