

Contagious Joy and Enduring Hope

A Sermon by James R. Newby

Text: Isaiah 61:1-4

This Scripture reading is a familiar one. The first part of this passage was the text that Jesus read in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth. They are important words—words that get to the heart of what Jesus’ ministry was all about. My focus this morning, however, is on the last two verses: “They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.” I like these two verses because they are, what I would call, “Verses of Renewal and Reformation.” “Build up,” “Raise up,” “Repair...” All words of renewal and reformation.

I have given most of my life to the practice of spiritual renewal. Whether it is the spiritual renewal of individuals or the spiritual renewal of religious institutions. My passion and hope are centered in the belief that persons and institutions do not have to settle for “the way things are,” but can strive to become the vital, life changing, world changing instruments that I believe God is calling us to be.

This morning I would like to look at *two marks of vitality* that, I believe, will help renew us individually and corporately...

The first mark is contagious joy. Joy is an inward quality which finds outward expression in the love and care we share with one another. It can be expressed in a child's face on Christmas morning, or in a mother or father's tears on their child's wedding day. We can see it in the eyes of those we serve at Tender Mercies, and in the eyes of those doing the serving. It is a complex emotion, yet it is one of the simplest of all experiences and feelings.

Renewed, vital communities of faith are characterized by *contagious joy*. It is in times when we are together in Centering Down, study groups and worship that this joy becomes most apparent, although it is quietly present in all forms of ministry. One of the best models of contagious joy was Mother Teresa of Calcutta. On a daily basis, this little Albanian Nun would go about the work of sharing the love of Christ with the poverty-stricken inhabitants of Calcutta. Every morning that she was at home, she would take her cart onto the streets in search of those in need of help. A moving account tells of her holding a tiny baby who had been abandoned, "so small that her very existence seemed like a miracle." As she held this child, she exclaimed, "See! There is life in her!"

In reflecting on why she had written her book, *The Christian's Secret to a Happy Life*, the Philadelphia Quaker, Hannah Whitall Smith says: "A keen observer once said to me, 'You Christians seem to have a religion that makes you miserable. You are like a man with a headache. He does not want to get

rid of his head, but it hurts him to keep it. You cannot expect outsiders to seek very earnestly for anything so uncomfortable.’ Then for the first time I saw, as in a flash, that the religion of Christ ought to be, and was meant to be, to its possessors, not something to make them miserable, but something to make them happy; and I began then and there to ask the Lord to show me the secret of a happy Christian life.”

Contagious joy blesses the individual who possesses it and is the source from which our witness to those with whom we come in contact, springs. People who do not have it, want it, and people who have it, want to share it.

A second mark of a renewed vitality is enduring hope. Persons of faith live in the hope that whatever happens outside cannot destroy what is within them. Early Friends were especially aware of this truth as they suffered for their faith prior to the Act of Toleration of 1689. Reading about the early Quakers in the *Book of Sufferings* is a moving experience. One such victim of cruelty, Margaret Newby, was a cousin of mine. In his book, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, William Braithwaite shares what happened in 1655: “The place had already earned the name of ‘the persecuting town of Evesham’ when in the middle of a cold November two women Friends in Westmoreland, Margaret Newby and Elizabeth Cowart, came to it. After a large Meeting, they went to visit the prisoners. The townspeople were excited against the Quakers, and when one of the women,

Margaret Newby, began to address them she was arrested and put in the stocks.”

Margaret Newby was left in the stocks and in the cold damp weather for 17 hours, and as a result of this exposure she later died. Her life and her witness were a source of enduring hope for many others who suffered for their faith.

One of my favorite singers out of the past is Dame Vera Lynn. She sang such classics as “There will be Blue Birds Over the White Cliffs of Dover” as well as the songs, “A Lovely Day,” and “We’ll Meet Again.” Listening to her sing these classics, I was moved by the lyrics and how the *spirit of hope* was immersed within the song. If you look her up on YOU TUBE you can see her singing to the British troops during World War II, all of whom had tears in their eyes. They are songs of *enduring hope*, and if ever anyone needed hope, it was the inhabitants of England during the darkest days of World War II.

A contagious joy, and an enduring hope. It is what George Fox was able to experience when he testified that he saw that there was “... an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the ocean of darkness.” As we wander today from one ethical crisis to another, and from one negative Presidential “tweet” to another, persons of faith need to know experientially, and share with others *their joy and their hope*. In this way, we can begin the process outlined by Isaiah, of renewing ourselves and our institutions.