

Joy and Hope

A Message 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 spiritual renewal. Whether it is the spiritual renewal of individuals or the spiritual renewal of religious institutions. My passion and hope resides 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 what I believe to be two essential marks of vitality that 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. This is why at the close of our worship together we ask if there are joys that people would like to share with others in our community. Joy can be expressed in a child's face on Christmas morning, or in a father's tears on his child's wedding day. It is a complex emotion, and yet it is the simplest of all experiences.**

Renewed, vital communities of faith are characterized by contagious joy. It is in times of 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 small in stature Albanian Nun would go about

the work of sharing her 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,” she said, “that her very existence seemed like a miracle.” As she held this child, she exclaimed, “See! There is life in her!”

I can't talk about joy without referencing the Quaker classic of devotion titled, *The Christian's Secret to a Happy Life*. It is written by Hannah Whitall Smith, a Philadelphia Quaker. She writes: “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 us. From time to time we all get the feeling that the random experiences and sensations and events that we call living, do not really add up to anything. A feeling that our lives are meaningless. We are always living on the brink of this chasm of meaninglessness where, with just a nudge, we might tumble into despair. "Why am I here?" "What has my life meant?" "What is the purpose of it all?"* Enduring hope is about the stories we tell that help us make *meaning* out of our lives...The stories that restore to us**

our sense of purpose and worth, and make our lives worth living again.

Early Friends were especially aware of this truth as they suffered for their faith prior to the Act of Toleration of 1689. Reading the stories about the early Quakers in the *Books of Sufferings* is a moving experience. As we traveled throughout the north of England last week, many of us on that trip could feel the "cloud of witnesses" that accompanied us, recognizing that we are the inheritors of a freedom of worship that was earned from the sufferings of our predecessors...the enduring hope that has come at a great cost. One such victim of cruelty was a relative of mine, Margaret Newby, about whom I wrote in a recent *Traveling Friend* article. 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 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 for 17 hours, and as a result of exposure died within a week.

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.” Many of us traveling the hills and dales of northern England on that mini-bus last week tried to remember the lyrics and sing these songs of hope. Listening to Vera Lynn, I am moved by how the *spirit of hope* is immersed within these songs. 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 as she sang. 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 news story to another, persons of faith need to know experientially, and share with others *our joy and our hope*. In this way, we can begin the process outlined by Isaiah, *to build up, to raise up and to repair the devastations of many generations*.