

The Power of Hope

A Sermon by James R. Newby

Text: Romans 5:1-5

“We rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because the love of God is poured into our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

This verse, out of the *Letter to the Romans*, thought by many scholars to be the most important of Paul’s Letters, is not saying that tragedy or pain make us happy. Rather, Paul is saying that God is about the business of helping us to *transform* sadness, our losses, our anger into something positive through the power of love...And that positive is HOPE.

Over the years I have grown fond of Don Quixote, and his colleague, Sancho Panza. His story is portrayed in the musical, *Man of La Mancha*. Don Quixote, in the words of the musical, is always, “tilting at windmills.” This has become an idiom in current English

to mean a fruitless battle against a trumped-up enemy. In the musical, Sancho Panza sings a song that asks the questions, “Why does he do the things he does?” Why does he risk his life and limb to prove some point of gallantry? Why doesn’t he just let things lie as they are?

The answer, I think, for Don Quixote is *not unlike* an answer that Paul might give...*One finds strength in the endeavor to be faithful to God in the power of hope to overcome what is evil—to empower us with character and equip us to engage in the fight for justice.*

I love the story of Ray Blankenship, who was preparing his breakfast one morning, as he gazed out the window and saw a small girl being swept along in the rain-flooded drainage ditch beside his Andover, Ohio home. Blankenship knew that farther downstream, the ditch disappeared underneath a road and then emptied into the main culvert. Ray dashed out the door and raced along the ditch, trying to get ahead of the child.

“Then he hurled himself into the deep and churning water...Blankenship surfaced and was able to grab the child’s arm. They tumbled end over end, and within about three feet of the culvert, Ray’s free hand felt something, possibly a rock, protruding from one bank. He clung desperately, but the force of the water tried to tear him and the child away. “If I can just hang on until help arrives,” he thought.

Well, he did better than that. By the time the fire-department rescuers arrived, Blankenship had pulled the girl to safety. Both were treated for shock. Later that year, Ray Blankenship was awarded the Coast Guard’s Silver Lifesaving Medal. The award was fitting, for this selfless person was at even greater risk to himself than most people knew. You see, Ray Blankenship can’t swim.”

This story comes from the archive of stories that for years were told over the radio by the late Paul Harvey. I loved listening to Paul Harvey because he always told *stories of hope* and how ordinary persons could do extraordinary things.

One of my good friends in the Twin Cities, a Korean War Veteran, told me a story of a Quaker he knew in that war...a man who was an ordinary person who did extraordinary things. With tears in his eyes, my friend said, “That Quaker was the bravest man I ever knew. I was on multiple combat missions with him, and although he never carried a weapon...he was a medic non-combatant...He was always the first on the battlefield to care for the wounded and dying, placing his own life in danger on a daily and sometimes hourly basis.”

Friends, when the Apostle Paul writes about hope, he is writing about the hope of Don Quixote, the hope of Ray Blankenship, and the hope of the Quaker Medic in the Korean War. He is writing about the hope of those ordinary persons who have done extraordinary things in their lives. He is writing about the hope of those who are here this morning, persons like yourselves who serve our community, our neighbors and a Meeting like this one. We are a Meeting that confronts the discrimination that is directed toward

the LGBTQ community by asserting that we are Open and Affirming. We are a Solidarity Meeting that confronts the injustice of America's immigration system. We are a community that is active in making our diverse community of many colors more inclusive. Ordinary people, like you and me, through whom, in the words of Paul, "the power of hope has been poured."

That hope is what has empowered our heroes—heroes like Martin Luther King Jr., the Quaker, Bayard Rustin, Mother Teresa, and the Quakers who fill the Books of Sufferings, 12,000 of them, who suffered and died for their faith prior to the Toleration Act of 1689. That is the hope that allows us to do the things that we need to do for justice, for peace, for equality and for those who are considered expendables in our society, the poor, the immigrant and for all of those who have no hope. In the words of Anne Lamott, one of my favorite authors, "Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come.

**You wait and watch and work: you don't give up." This is, I believe,
a hope that can transform the world.**