From the Pulpit

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“Hope Comes Alive”
2014 August Sermon Series
From the Pulpit
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“Hope is Anchored in Our Souls”

August 3, 2014

By The Rev. Tim Ahrens
Senior Minister
Note: When I delivered this sermon on 8/3/14, several people asked of other stories that are supportive of the Israeli community working for peace and helping the victims of war. While I know of these stories and while my family and friends are intimately connected to the Jewish Community and Israel, the point of this sermon was to uplift and name the Christians in this conflict and this region. I invite you to share other stories with me – stories of Hope!

Blessings,

Tim Ahrens
A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 8, August 3, 2014, dedicated to our sisters and brothers in Israel, Palestine, especially Gaza who are caught in the crossfire of war, to G. Dene Barnard for 41 years of life among us sharing his gifts all this time! And to WIB Smith on his 87th Birthday and always to the God!

"Hope is Anchored in Our Souls"

Part I of V in the sermon series "Hope Comes Alive!"

Romans 5:1-5; Hebrews 6:19

"We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain…"

Hebrews 6:19 (NRSV)

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.
When the latest “cease-fire” was broken again and the hostilities between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza resumed on Friday only a few hours into the 72 truce, the warfare claimed its first confirmed Christian victim: 60- year-old woman Jalileh Ayyad. There are only 1300 Palestinian Christians in the Gaza – compared to 1.8 million Muslims. But, with Jalileh’s death, our tiny minority religious community caught in the crossfire of this larger conflict paused to give thanks to God in Jesus Christ for her life and witness. In her death, there was a resurrection.

The Christian churches, schools and hospitals in the Gaza have become beacons on light in this highly volatile and deadly conflict. Two days before The Sisters of Charity Home (Mother Teresa’s place) was bombed. Established to provide Hope to 28 adults with disabilities and elderly citizens of Gaza, the Sisters had received a call from the Israeli army warning them to vacate the building. They responded, “Don’t bomb us. We do not support Hamas. We have no bombs and weapons. We have nowhere to go. We are only here to bring God’s love and hope to the most vulnerable of God’s suffering children.” The bombs fell anyway. People were killed anyway. On the same day, the residence of the religious sisters serving the Latin Parish in Zeitoun, Gaza, was damaged by an Israeli shell.
Reporting from Gaza, El-Yousef, a Christian writer continues:

*I received an urgent call two days ago from Suhaila Tarazi, director of the Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza, explaining the urgency for medicines, medical supplies and, more importantly, fuel to operate the hospital’s generator. She reported the hospital had to make a painful decision to shut down their generator for 4 hours that afternoon in order to ration fuel. She was very upset not knowing what impact it will have on the patients’ treatment and recovery. We immediately lobbied with our connections to ensure the hospital gets the fuel supply it needs to continue to save lives.*

El-Yousef praised the work of George Anton, a CNEWA team member: “*George leaves his young family on a daily basis and risks his own life to visit local institutions and individuals in order to assess the situation on the ground.*”

He describes his personal experience and the stories of ordinary people affected by the war, the dozens of displaced families housed at the Holy Family Catholic Church, the hundreds of injured patients at the Anglican-run Al Ahli Arab Hospital and over 1,100 devout Muslim women and their children are taking refuge at the ancient Greek Orthodox church of St. Porphyrios. There is an appeal for
blankets, water and food. Another reporter says that “whole families are living in churches.” Wherever there are churches, there are people moving in for shelter.

“(We need hope in Gaza). Our churches and Church institutions in Gaza continue to be that beacon of hope despite all of the misery,” El-Yousef wrote. “Holy Family School, the Greek Orthodox parish and the Greek Orthodox Cultural Center have all opened up their facilities to hundreds of displaced families, giving them food, clean water and above all a safe roof over their heads. The Al Ahli Arab Hospital continues to open up its facilities in this emergency crisis to anyone needing medical treatment, free of charge. Incarnate Word Father Georges Hernandez continues to risk his life every day by making home and hospital visits. The Missionaries of Charity continue to call Gaza home despite the various offers for evacuation.”

Despite all of the suffering, with over 1,200 Palestinians dead and thousands more wounded, the Christian mission is certainly at its best. These brave souls — who are personally risking their lives — continue to comfort the injured and displaced, and provide assistance to the weak and marginalized with the Gospel in their hearts. Please know that your support and prayers for the people of Gaza, especially the women and children, are priceless and help to keep hope and faith alive.”
In telling these stories, did you hear that “Hope” was lifted up as a primary driver for the good being done in this war-torn conflict? The Christian presence in this conflict is one of shelter, care, hospitality and love – living into Hope. I, for one, am inspired by Hope rising from the violence and rubble of war.

As Christians, I believe Hope is the anchor of Christian faith. And I believe our Hope is anchored in our re-framing Christ's death on the cross as the beginning act of His Resurrection from the dead. This is Resurrection HOPE. As theologian and scholar Elaine Pagels writes about resurrection hope:

“(Jesus’ end) would be very bad news if it weren’t that underneath this rather dark story is an enormous hope that this very unpromising story and its terrible anguished ending is nevertheless not the ending, that there’s a mystery in it, a divine mystery of God’s revelation that will happen yet.”

But, there is even more to be said of Hope in faith-filled people. Our hope is grounded in our prayers. We are people of prayer. We confess our sins and our brokenness. We attest to our part in the world which is unhealed. Quite
simply, we repent. And every act of repentance is an act of Hope. Whenever and wherever we can acknowledge, name and claim our part in what is broken, we begin to rebuild and heal ourselves and this world – what the Jews call “Tikun Olam” healing the world. When we are building or rebuilding we have become “agents of hope” (I will return to this August 31st).

It is never too soon or too late for you to Hope. It is never too soon or too late to speak of Hope, to act on Hope – no matter what tempts you to be afraid, angry or desperate. Hope begets hope. Rubbing shoulders with Hopeful people makes us hopeful as well. This is the precious gift of the Spirit of God alive and well in this world – despite all evidence to bring you, me and God to our knees. So, hope rises in faithful people.

To this end, the Apostle Paul writes so beautifully in Romans 5:1-5:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s
love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Hope reflects the state of your soul rather than the gravity of circumstances surrounding your days. When we praise God, our souls get stronger. Hope is “realistic” writes Jurgen Moltmann in his Theology of Hope. He continues:

“Hope alone can be called ‘realistic’ because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught. Hope does not take things as they happen to (be), but as progressing, moving things with possibilities of change. Only as long as the world and the people in it are in a fragmented and experimental state, which is not yet resolved, is there any sense of earthly hopes. Hope is not a transfigured glow superimposed on a darkened existence but a
realistic way of perceiving the scope of our real possibilities, and as such, hope sets everything in motion and keeps it in a state of change.” (Jurgen Moltmann, *A Theology of Hope*, SCM Press, 1967, p. 25).

In other words, hope is living, breathing, real and realistic. It is moving, changing and ever bringing us new possibilities in the midst of our lives.

When we live into hope, we see the challenges before us as opportunities. We drop anchor in the immense sea of God’s love, and we place ourselves in the faith of the Risen Christ as we discover that our anchor of hope keeps us steady in the storms of our lives.

This week, look into your life. Name and claim your anchor of Hope. And hang on to it! Look at your life and give thanks to God for the hope that is in you. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: “Seize the hope that is set before you. Trust that this hope is your soul’s sure and steadfast anchor placed there . . . through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.

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“Hope Cannot Be Seen”
- Hebrews 11:1
Part II of V in sermon series “Hope Comes Alive!”

August 10, 2014
The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister
A Baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 8, August 10, 2014, dedicated to Eliza on her baptismal day, to my daughter Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens in thanksgiving for her faithfulness to God in Jesus Christ through her 14 years and eight months of growing up here and now a blessing to her as she goes forth to Hocking College in Nelsonville to pursue her dreams and always to the glory of God!

“Hope Cannot Be Seen” - Hebrews 11:1

Part II of V in sermon series “Hope Comes Alive!”

To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see. Hebrews 11:1

Anyone who is among the living has hope. Ecclesiastes 9:4

Surely there is a future, And your hope will not be cut off. Proverbs 23:18

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Hope cannot be seen. The Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11, verse 1 proclaims: “To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for; to be certain of the things we cannot see.”
The key to this short and powerful passage is found in one word – “hypostasis,” which from the Greek literally means "a standing under." A more complex definition is "that which underlies what is apparent." Amplified a bit further, it is that which, though unseen, exists beneath what is visible. It, then, has the sense of a foundation. Even as the foundation of a building is unseen, but the building above ground is apparent, the foundation, the hypostasis, is nonetheless real, supporting the building.

*Hypostasis* is the unseen support of what is standing in clear view. Spiritually speaking, invisible faith underlies, supports, and thus motivates the visible action. Let’s bring it home....The “Faith” that undergirds this “cathedral of grace” this “house of God’s justice” is the basis of our HOPE! Hope is our rock! We build everything on Hope.

Hope can only be felt as a powerful response to something coming, something that is beyond explanation. One of teachers and spiritual mentors, the late-Fr. Henri Nouwen wrote in the introduction to book *With Open Hands*. "Hope expects the coming of something new. Hope looks toward that which is not yet. Hope accepts the risks of the unspecified."

The Apostle Paul understood Hope better than any Christian writer in the early scriptures. Writing from a prison cell to the Church in Rome in 65 AD and facing his death, Paul penned these words: “… hope that is seen is no
hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” (Romans 8:24-25).

To have hope, we must trust is what is unseen. And we must wait patiently. If there is anything I can say about our 2000 year old faith, believing and trusting in unseen things is one of our greatest gifts.

In her book, *Living into Hope*, The Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell writes:

“Life has taught me that hope is born in the eye of the storm. Hope is not happiness. Rather it is the fulfillment that comes from a life that takes risks and loves deeply and falls and soars and falls and rises again.” (Quoted in Joan Brown Campbell’s book *Living Into Hope*, 2010, Skylight Paths, p. xx)

Joan is right about the birthplace of Hope in many of our lives. Often the unseen nature of Hope as been borne of suffering. All of us can attest to this. Some of the most hope-filled people we know have battled through cancer or oppression or depression and other horrors of life and they live to fight another day. They have walked through deserts and rainforests as survivors of torture and war, suffered holocaust, hunger, and despair in prison camps and somehow lived to tell the story. They have traversed oceans – sometimes on tiny wooden rafts – in their quest for freedom. They have survived abuse and found in the light that is in them a place to smile and they are truly
joyful. They are the ones who have no cause to hope – and yet they do.

27 years ago, I met such people up close. These were folks who had NO medical care – no eye care. They were trapped in a war zone – the Contra War. There they were... People, in the words of Paul who were waiting patiently for that which they did not have or Hope to have. I was on an Eye Mission trip in Nicaragua. Our Canadian and American team flew into the middle of the Contra War– funded and supported by Ronald Reagan and our US Government.

People came from all over the mountains of rural Nicaragua – walking through the Contras’ and Sandinistas battlegrounds to get eyeglasses, possible surgery and eye care for their children and themselves. They lined up for several days in a line that wove through small streets of this mountain community (at least a mile long) – waiting patiently for the clinic to open. The night before we opened, everyone disappeared. I walked out of our compound and there were no people there. The next morning they were back in line. When I asked what happened, they told me they remembered their place in line, went to stay in a family or friends or neighbors home and returned to their place in line.... Almost 1,000 people did this with no fighting, no arguing. There were even Contras in the line – who found shelter for the night. I was blown away. We – who struggle to be nice in the check-out line at the store, we could learn something from these hopeful people. We wait patiently for what we do not see – if our hope is found in the spirit of God! Learning from
our Nicaraguan neighbors is a blessing. The challenge for us is to interpret this blessing – here and now.

This week I want you look for Hope – which may be hiding from you in clear view. After all, part of the habitat of Hope is hidden-ness. Look for it in the nooks and crannies of your daily living. There it is growing and prospering. You may need to start by looking in a different way.

- Try asking more “why” questions of hopeful people.
- Be fully present and still in situations that seem chaotic or unfamiliar.
- Recall past hopes that were realized over time.
- Look inside despair, anger, fear, and evil to find the spores of hope.
- Suspend your usual thinking about “the bottom line” or “at the end of the day.”

Listen carefully to those who lived through the great depression or were imprisoned as prisoners of war or holocaust survivors. You will hear stories of hope. Listen carefully to people are poor and struggling on the edge of life tell you how they have been “blessed by God.” Watch your reactions to people who present themselves as hopeless. Maybe through it all, you will discover that hope is not hidden after all. You may even begin to see hope everywhere.
Blessings to you as you live into hope. May God open your eyes to see Hope in hidden and previously unseen places. Amen.

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“Hope in Trying Times”

Genesis 45:1-15; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

Part III of V in sermon series “Hope Comes Alive!”

August 17th, 2014

By Rev. Dan Clark

Designated Associate Minister
A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 15, verses 21-28.

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” 24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” 26 He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” 27 She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” 28 Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

L: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

P: Thanks be to God.
Norman McLean in “A River Runs Through It” writes, “Of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman, and now of course I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn’t. Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening. Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.”

The hope that a fish will rise.

Hoping for what you already have is no hope at all. Scripture tells us this. And our own common sense tells us too. Hope is a different kind of thing. So what is hope? Perhaps it’s easier… and more effective to determine what hope is not.
Hope is not wishful thinking. We light birthday candles and keep a secret wish to ourselves and then take a deep breath and get all the candles at once – whether it’s 5 candles or 50 or more. And then our wish will come true. We wish for good weather or a winning lottery ticket or to be magically transported to a beachside bungalow. And then we empty our lungs on the little candles and nothing changes. This is not hope.

Hope is not daydreaming. Daydreaming, instead, is a workplace coping mechanism. Zoning out, checking out leads us to turn off our brains and mysteriously stop blinking. Then something startles us and we realize we are where we were all along – in the cubicle, in the client meeting, in traffic, in the classroom. This is not hope.

Hope is not planning and practicing. We plan gardens and they grow. Hope doesn’t make my tomato plants bloom and bear fruit. We practice instruments and learn to play. Hoping to perfect Bach’s Prelude in C from the Well-Tempered Clavier
will do nothing for my fingers and the keys. Practice will, hope won’t. Planning and practicing is not hope.

So what is hope if it doesn’t involve birthday candles and daydreams? What is hope? Hope is what you do when things are… well… hopeless.

This is the third installment in a five week series Rev. Tim and I are sharing on hope. Today’s sermon is called, “Hope in Trying Times.” We could have saved two syllables and simply called the sermon “Hope in Times.” Is ‘trying’ even a helpful modifier? Let me ask you, when have times not been trying?!? I don’t remember. The thing about ‘times’ is that they always seem to be ‘trying’.

There are people and places right now experiencing these times – these ‘trying’ times – and the world is watching… Places like Ferguson, Missouri, Eastern Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, Northern Iraq, Robin Williams’ bedroom. These hopeless places
feel close to home. They have been on our screens and in our news feeds this week.

And even closer to home... there are unknown people in quieter places right now experiencing these times – these ‘trying’ times – and the world spins on without noticing... A middle school student is being bullied for his sexuality... a marriage is on the edge – there’s no tenderness left and every little thing becomes a big thing... the tests were last week and the doctor should call with the results this week.

Hope is what you do when times are... hopeless.

Psalm 9 is a somber and solemn song. We know this from the lyrics, but if we weren’t certain, we see too that the tune assigned to it is called *mutlu-labben*, or ‘Death of a Son’. Perhaps Psalm 9 was written when the community was experiencing grief and loss... and hopelessness. Perhaps Psalm 9 to the tune ‘Death of a Son’ was composed for the death of Lesley McSpadden’s and Michael Brown Sr.’s son. Perhaps it was composed for the
victims of territorial disputes in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Perhaps it was composed for the Yazidis, a people group ISIS is attempting to eliminate. Perhaps it was composed for those whose lives were touched by a comedic genius who was overcome by his depression. Perhaps it was written for the bullied and broken among us.

Listen now to this Psalm, sung to the tune, ‘Death of a Son’:

_I will give thanks to God with my whole heart;_

_I will tell of all your wonderful deeds._

The word for wonderful actually, more accurately, means ‘strange’ or ‘inexplicable’. Yes – sometimes things don’t make sense. Often things don’t make sense. And sometimes, even God doesn’t make sense. When times are hopeless, yes, I am full of wonder if by wonder you mean confusion.

_You have rebuked the nations, you have destroyed the wicked..._
But God sits enthroned forever,

God has established God's throne for judgment.

God judges the world with righteousness;

God judges the peoples with equity.

Judgment and righteousness. In Hebrew, *mishpat* and *tsedeq*. These words more fully defined point to a fair and responsible way to live… they point to the beautiful dance that occurs between creativity and love.

Now we are starting to move beyond wishful thinking and daydreaming, beyond extinguishing candles and zoning out. Maybe there is hope for the hopeless. Maybe there is hope if God generously gifts the universe and its inhabitants with responsibility and creativity, love and justice.

_Sing praises to God, who dwells in Zion._
Declare God’s deeds among the peoples.

For God who avenges blood is mindful of them;

God does not forget the cry of the afflicted.

Is God listening? Is God remembering? Does God hear the sound of riots in Ferguson? The sound of murder in Franklinton? Does God hear the loneliness in the dining room, the argument in the bedroom? Does God hear the cry of a bullied child on the playground?

The nations have sunk in the pit that they made;

in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught.

God has made God’s self known, God has executed judgment;

the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.

Higgaiion. Selah
Higgaoin and Selah are musical directions. Here there was an interlude, perhaps some improvisation. It's a break from singing, for sure. And that's a gift. We who are hopeless yet trying to get our heads and hearts into a grateful song about love and justice... we who have just gotten honest about how wickedness is a parasite and destroys its own carrier... we need a break. This is heavy. This is hard. We need a break to let this sink in. Selah. Breathe. Listen. Rest.

_For the needy shall not always be forgotten,

nor the hope of the poor perish forever._

_Rise up, O God! Do not let mortals prevail;

let the nations be judged before you._

_Put them in fear, O God;

let the nations know that they are only human._

_Selah_
Selah. Another break. And we need it. Another chance to let our humanity sink in. We need breaks like this. The hope of the poor will not perish forever. This is interesting. The psalm doesn’t indicate that hope will not perish ever, but just that it won’t perish forever. Sometimes hope is nowhere to be found. Sometimes hope vanishes. Sometimes hope seems to even betray us. It slips through our fingers and runs from our hearts. Hope will perish. Now and then. Sometimes. And for a time. But hope will not perish forever. Selah. Breathe. Listen. Rest. Let it all sink in. Take a much-needed break.

One of my favorite ways to take a break – and I don’t get to do it often though I really enjoy it – is flyfishing. Selah. Breathe. Listen. Rest. Drink a hot coffee early in the morning on the way to a cold river. Put on boots and waders. Look around to see what bugs are hatching and tie the right fly on. And then get that line in the water… joining Norman McLean in the hope that a fish will rise.
The first time I went flyfishing – 10 or 12 years go – I went with a friend who had been flyfishing since before I was born. I put the gear on he told me to. I tied on the fly that he told me to tie on. I false casted like I had been taught – I learned to get the fly out there – to the best spots. And then I fished. And fished. And fished. And then... nothing. And then I fished. And fished. And fished. And then... nothing. I was starting to lose my faith that there were fish in this river. I was making wishes every time I blew a bug away from my face... I was daydreaming, zoning out to the rhythm of the river. I had planned and practiced. And nothing. No fish. There I was, haunted by these waters and left with nothing... nothing, that is, but the hope that a fish would rise. There were only two things for me to do: stay connected and wait.

I had to stay connected to my experienced fishing companion. He knew more than I knew. Had seen more, experienced more, tasted more... fresh beer-battered and fried rainbow trout. I had to stay connected to a more hopeful person than I, someone whose hope had been fed by time and experience. Staying connected to a more hopeful fisherman gave me hope.
And I had to wait. I didn’t want to wait. I didn’t like to wait. I’m not necessarily good at waiting. My assumption is I’m not alone in this. But the hope... is in... the waiting.

Listen to a selection from “East Coker” from The Four Quartets by T.S. Eliot:

_O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark..._

_I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you_

_Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,_

_The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed_

_With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness..._

_I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope_

_For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love_

_For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith_
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

The hope is in the waiting. When haunted by the waters of the rivers of life, we need to stay connected to people who are hope-full. When haunted by the emptiness and the violence of life, we need to stay connected to a hope-full God, or as St. Paul, author of the letter to the Romans says, the God who is the source of hope. Stay connected. And wait.

I don’t know what will emerge in Ferguson or eastern Ukraine or northern Iraq or Israel and Palestine. No one does. I don’t know what will come of the darkness of war or the emptiness in our lives or the violence in our neighborhoods. And yes, there are things we can do and be to plant a love and justice that will bloom before our eyes. But we can’t do any of it apart from hope. So we hope. And we wait. Through the darkness and emptiness and violence. We wait and hope through the sadness.

Here is what Robin Williams said about hope and his battle with addiction in a 2006 interview with Diane Sawyer.
(Robin Williams audio clip.)

“There’s sadness. And then there’s also hope.” Stay connected and wait for it... and the fish will rise. Amen.

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“Agents of Hope’
Transform the World”

(Part V of V in the sermon series,
“Hope Comes Alive”)

August 31st, 2014
By Rev. Tim Ahrens
Senior Minister
A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 31, 2014, dedicated to the memory of my friend and a champion for justice, Ms. Alicia Rivers and to our newborn beauties, Caleb Frank and Isabelle Collins, as they enter this world in loving families and always to the glory of God!

″Agents of Hope’ Transform the World″
(Part V of V in the sermon series, “Hope Comes Alive”)
Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Through the five Sundays of August, Rev. Clark and I have focused on “Hope” in our sermon series, “Hope Comes Alive.” The sermons have been entitled, “Hope is Anchored in our Souls,” “Hope Cannot be Seen,” “Hope in Trying Times,” and “Hope Comes Alive in an Imaginative Faith.” Today I conclude with “Agents of Hope Transform the World.” All the sermons may be found on our church website www.first-church.org. They are also printed and found in our information racks at 9th Street (and hopefully) Broad St. on the table. Soon, all five will be printed together and placed in the same locations.
On his behalf, let me say, thank you to you for the favorable response and interaction we have experienced in response to this series. In you, “Hope Comes Alive.”

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Hope is not just about faith. Hope is found in knowledge. In fact, **Hope is embedded in the temperament of our brains.** A hopeful (or bold or uninhibited) disposition is likely rooted in your genetic make-up and emerges in your early life. As you mature, hope can become your default position in life. This happens best when your hopefulness is further reinforced with life experiences which bolster hope. But, nonetheless, a hopeful brain overcomes evidence which seeks to override it. **Hope is wired in!**

I love the story of identical twins that had completely opposite approaches to life. One was always positive and one was always negative. One lived in hope and one lived in despair. So, on their eighth birthday, their parents sought to turn the tables. They gave the negative twin a room filled with computers, action games, videos and more. He walked in saw everything in front of him and began to complain about how
these items were not good enough. For the positive twin, they filled a room with horse manure. He walked in with a huge smile on his face and threw his hands into the pile of manure proclaiming - “Thanks Mom and Dad! This is wonderful! Where ever there is this much manure, a new pony can’t be far away!”

Do you see how our brains are wired (or not) for Hope?

In another story, Hope met Reality in St. Mary Byzantine School as I was walking down the hallway with the principal, Sister Mary Griffin (the sister of the Diocese of Columbus’ Bishop Jim Griffin). Sr. Mary was telling me how hard life was for the children in her inner-city Cleveland school. As we walked and talked, we approached a kindergartner in the hallway. She was a beam of God’s pure light - buoyant, beautiful and filled with hope in the day that God had given her.

When she overheard our conversation about the hard life of the children, she stopped, turned and looked right at her principal and said – with tears in her eyes - “Sr. Mary, Nobody ever told me life was hard.” Hope had just encountered Reality. Sr. Mary knelt down and hugged her tiny kindergartner and reassured her that she was loved and would continue to shine God’s light. Holding the child’s face in her hands, Sr. Mary said, “You keep hope alive, my child.”

Hope meets us in empty hallways at school as well as the empty tomb and turns our tears into dancing. Hope meets us in
our down days and lifts us to new beginnings. Hope does not disappoint us.  *Hope is in our brains! It is wired in. How we tap into the Hope that is in us is up to us.*

Hope comes alive through special agents of hope in our lives. They are our Transformers – transforming our deepest grief into our greatest hope. You know who the special transforming agents of hope are in your life. Meditate upon them for a second. Give thanks to God for them. Hope comes alive in “Hopeful” people. That is perhaps the most important truth of Hope!

In John Bunyan’s classic, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the hero of his story is named Christian. Christian is accompanied on his pilgrim’s journey to the Promised Land by a friend named Hopeful. As they reach the River Jordan, the last stage of their journey, Christian becomes overwhelmed by the waters rising and moving fast in front of him. He says to Hopeful, “*I sink in deep waters, the billows go over my head, and the waves go over me.*” Hopeful responds, “*Be of good cheer my brother. I feel the bottom and it is good.*” But panic sets in and Christian fears that he will drown and never behold the gates of Jerusalem. As Christian sinks deeper and deeper, Hopeful struggles to keep his friend’s head above water and tells him that Jesus is watching and waiting for him. Christian responds that it is only Hopeful for whom the Lord awaits. “*No,*” Hopeful responds, “*Be of good cheer. The Lord is making you whole now.*”
With this Christian begins to recite Isaiah 43:2: "When you pass through, I will be with you and through the rivers; they shall not overflow you." The crisis ends. They find their footing. As they reach the shores, they are met by two Shining Ones whom the Lord has sent to welcome them into the house of salvation (John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, New York: Washington Square Press, 1957, pp. 151-152).

Without Hopeful, Christian would surely have drowned. With Hopeful’s encouraging presence, Christian would have given up. He would have succumbed to despair. Without Hopeful, all of us are vulnerable to giving in and giving up. With Hopeful, we can sink and be swept away by despair.

I believe, Hopeful is a special agent of God. He is the one whom God chooses to lift his friend from despair to hope; from death to life. I also believe, everyone one of us can be such a special agents of Hope for others. We have the power of God within us, to reach into the raging waters of life and be present to those around us in times of great need.

Let me be more succinct – I see you as Hopeful. In your homes, in school, at work, in hospital rooms, in nursing homes, in your neighborhoods and in this church, you reach out to others and lift them up. In seen and unseen ways, day-to-day – you are Hopeful. You represent Hope. Your imaginative faith brings hope alive. You brain and spirits – wired to hope – make hope possible for others to grab of when the waters of
despair are sweeping over them. I know – because I have been lifted up and saved by the likes of you in my life and in Columbus, Ohio. You are the Hopeful to my Christian.

Last March, I was testifying at the Ohio Statehouse for Medicaid Expansion. Outside the hearing room – filled with nay-saying House Representatives – was a group of ten young adults with developmental and physical disabilities who had drive 3 hours from Cleveland for a rally at the statehouse - many of them in wheelchairs, all of them hopeful that the legislators who expand Medicaid and give them much needed assistance. I sat down on the bench next to one young woman who said to me through halting and stuttering speech – but with a smile as big as the sun, “I can’t speak good. I don’t have many words. Would you speak for me?” I said, “I would be honored to do that.” I asked her name. She replied, “My name is ‘Angel.’” She gave me her button. I wore it proudly. I spoke for Angel. But, it was really Angel who was the Special Agent of Hope who lifted me up and gave me strength to witness on her behalf.

My friends, we are called to be Angels for others. We are called to be angels of Mercy and Justice. We are called to be like Hopeful was to Christian. So be Hopeful. Be hopeful so that this world which God created as “good” doesn’t sweep you and others away. Be hopeful, so that you and others around
you – may live. In your body, mind and spirit, I pray that Hope may Come Alive. Amen.

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“Hope Comes Alive In an Imaginative Faith”

(Part IV of V in the sermon series: Hope Comes Alive”

August 24th, 2014

By Rev. Tim Ahrens
Senior Minister
A baptismal meditation delivered by Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, 11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 24, 2014, dedicated to Ellie Harper Winberry on her baptismal day and to Cathy Levine on this Matzovah in blessed memory of her mother and always to the Glory of God!

"Hope Comes Alive In an Imaginative Faith"

(Part IV of V in the sermon series: Hope Comes Alive"

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and salvation. Amen.

I’ve heard it said, “You can’t do something hopeful if you use the same kind of thinking that created your despair in the first place.” Another way of positively framing this is: “What you can imagine, you can do.” Hope comes alive in an imaginative faith.

Thoughts of an imaginative faith rose in my mind as I was on the phone three weeks ago with Nicole Hockley. Nicole, from Newtown Connecticut, had emailed me and asked for time to talk. She wanted to tell me about a project near and dear to her heart called “The Sandy Hook Promise.” Certainly I knew
the name Sandy Hook - from the Elementary School in which 20 first graders and six adult educators were killed on December 14, 2012. “The Sandy Hook Promise,” about which Nicole wanted to speak is this: “I Promise to join other parents to encourage and support sensible solutions that help prevent gun violence in our communities and our country.”

As Nicole introduced herself to me, she began, “My two sons were in school at Sandy Hook on December 12, 2014. My oldest son was in the fifth grade and my youngest son, Dylan was killed in his first grade classroom that morning.” She continued speaking but I was stuck on the shooting death of her six year old son. As she talked, I went online and found a picture of Dylan (and the other 25 shooting victims – including the shooter himself). I printed out Dylan’s picture and as she spoke, my imagination flowed into the heart of this courageous mother. With tears streaming down my face, I tried to listen again.

Eventually Nicole asked, “Rev. Ahrens, do you have any questions?” “Just one,” I said. “How do you do this?” I asked. “As a father of four, I wonder, how do you pick up the phone and call a complete stranger and get your words together to talk?” She quietly and thoughtfully replied, “I have hope. I hope through our efforts, I will help some family out there who will not have to suffer as we have suffered. I cling to this hope.”

Through the power of her imagination, Nicole Hockley is doing something hopeful with a new kind of thinking. Along
with others, she is hopeful that gun violence will end and those who need mental health care will receive it. She is hopeful that a call to an unknown pastor three states away, will bring others together who will join a movement of hope AND ACTION – because Hope should always inspire ACTION – to make some changes in this land.

So far Nicole’s hope planted in my heart is bearing fruit. Because of Nicole’s hope and this picture of her son Dylan that I carry with me, 25 pastors are gathering in the large conference room of First Church on September 11th to have a prayerful conversation about ending gun violence in Columbus and Ohio.

Like Nicole Hockley, The Rev. William Barber II inspires me with his imaginative and hopeful faith. This 51 yr. old UCC pastor and president of the NAACP out of Raleigh, North Carolina, who walks with a cane because of a painful arthritic condition affecting the spine which has afflicted him for 30 years, (ankylosing spondylitis), has started a “Moral Movement” which he and others launched because of highly restrictive voter registration and election laws passed on Maundy Thursday 2013. As he said, "On Maundy Thursday, they chose to crucify voting rights in North Carolina. What would Jesus do about that?" When telling this story while leaning on his cane, Rev. Barber continues with a smile, “This old crippled preacher has found his legs.”
Because of Rev. Barber's inspiring, imaginative and hopeful faith, I assisted in organizing 40 clergy who came to the Statehouse last Thursday and joined in solidarity with "The Moral Movement," committing ourselves to our own week of prayer for justice in Ohio. You have an insert on this week and all of us are invited to pray - wherever we are - in this week of prayer which unites us with 11 states - including North Carolina - about concerns of our day. Imagine an Ohio with justice for all the people and for the all the earth, sky and water within our borders.

Where better than the church to be the place where - in the Apostle Paul's words, "we are not conformed to the patterns of this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds..." (Romans 12:2)?

To be transformed we need to remember, in the words of Congregational preacher and abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, "The church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for education of imperfect ones."

Can you imagine something different in this world because of your hope-filled faith?

There is an expression - "you are what you eat." As people of God, children of the Most High and Hopeful Creator of the Universe, let's turn this phrase from food to faithful
imagination…. “You are what you hope.” In the case of hope, your outlook, your identity, your whole perspective can change. Consider these questions:

- When, where and with who do you feel most hopeful? Why?
- How long are you willing to wait for your hopes to be realized?
- What unhopeful ideals or behaviors are you still nibbling or devouring? (For example: whining, carping, finding fault, gossiping, triangulating, or demonizing).
- Which among your hopes your hopes have always been part of your personality and which are new to your life?
- With whom do you share your most cherished hopes?
- With whom do you share your most cherished hopeful actions?
- After which HOPE-Hero do you pattern your life? How is that going?
- What secret hope would you like to tell someone else about?

If you are lacking a HOPE-Hero, I recommend you spend some time around young children. As a pastor, I find our greatest imaginative life and hope comes from our children.
Unknowingly they embody hope and delight for us. I say unknowingly, because they don't set out to show us. They simply live their hope. They show us how to expect “the new,” to look toward that, which is not yet, and to accept and risk the unspecified. They embody what we have lost in the way of imagination.

I love the story of a young child who went into her new baby's bedroom one night. After her parents went downstairs, she sneaked in. What she didn't know was that mom and dad were listening to everything on the "baby Monitor" in the Living Room. She went to her little brother's bedside. She sang a song to the baby. Then she said, "Baby, tell me what heaven is like. I am beginning to forget. Little brother, please tell me about it so I don't forget."

Maybe our lack of imaginative hope is found in this simple truth. We have forgotten what heaven is like. Maybe we have forgotten how to imagine.

Have we forgotten how to hope? I hope not! I pray this week, Hope rises from your imaginative life of faith. “What you can imagine, you can do.” Amen.

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