

WE CHOOSE HOPE: HOPE FOR THOSE IN NEED

Matthew 5:1-12

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In this five week worship series, “We Choose Hope,” we are highlighting the specific ways in which this congregation seeks to share the hope that is at the heart of the Christian message. To be a Christian is to be a person of hope. You don’t have to be an optimist, necessarily – optimism seems to come more easily to some people than others; I’m not sure it’s as much a choice as it is the way we are wired. But hope is an intentional choice. It is the choice we are called to make every morning when we wake up and remember our identity as baptized Christians. We are to be people of hope.

Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is grounded in the belief that we have a God who loves us, unconditionally, and who wants the best for us, always. If you don’t believe it or feel it, just flip through the Bible and see all of the astonishingly flawed people God loves - people like David, and Peter, and Paul, all of whom made mistakes and yet were embraced by their creator.

Hope is grounded in our experience, which tells us that when we are engaged in purposeful work, when we devote ourselves to the calling of our hearts, when we truly give ourselves to love, we find joy and meaning. That is how life is meant to be lived. God never promises that life will be fair, or that we won’t suffer. God does promise to be with us through it all.

What God intends is that we live in community with one another, and that we look out for one another’s needs in this global village. When we do those two things, we find that we are no longer as lonely, as isolated, as anxious or as fearful.

That's hope – the knowledge that we can get up every day and make a real difference for good.

I hope you have noticed over the past three weeks that our Financial Stewardship Team has produced videos that accompany each week's theme. We have showed you the ways that we are working towards unity, the ways that we are embracing children, and – last week, the ways that we are caring for the earth. When we began to work on the video for this week, Barry Cummings said, "Well, we'll have no shortage of pictures to show this church caring for those in need...there's the weekend of service, the food drives, the mission trips, the food bank volunteers, the Haven Center meals, the Christmas giving tree, and on and on." Mission has been a part of the DNA of this congregation for a long time.

Just as we cannot be Christian without hope, we cannot be Christian without being charitable. Compassion towards people who are poor and marginalized is a theme throughout the Bible. One of the identifying marks of God's character is that God is merciful towards people who are weak and dispossessed. There's a story about two seminary classmates who were arguing about how much the Bible talks about the poor. The argument was won when one of them said, "I'm going to cut out all of the references to the poor that are in the Bible." He took a pair of scissors and began cutting – he cut out most of Exodus where the Israelites are commanded not to oppress foreigners, widows and orphans; he cut out most of Leviticus and Deuteronomy where farmers are told not to harvest all of their crops, but to leave the food at the edge of the fields for the poor. He cut out the Old Testament prophets who said, "Let justice roll down like mountains and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" and those who said, "What

God commands is that you do justice, love kindness and walk humbly.” Moving to the New Testament, he cut out the pages that record Jesus’ first sermon in which he quotes from Isaiah saying, “The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor and the brokenhearted.” He cut out the Beatitudes, our passage for today, and all of the places where the early church is told to care for the needs of those among them who are most vulnerable and share what they have with those who have less. In the end, the Bible was falling apart in his hands; it was a Bible full of holes. There is nothing the Bible mentions more than meeting the needs of the forgotten.

Last week we talked about the unbreakable connection between our relationship with God and our relationship with all that God has created. We realized that we can’t say we love God if we aren’t doing our best to love the earth and all God’s creatures. The same logic applies today. God has created us to live in community, not just community with those who are like us, not just with those on the same rung of the socio-economic ladder, but with all people. Our lives are bound up with the lives of those who are hungry and those who are homeless. We may try to pretend that it’s not the case, that we have absolutely nothing in common with people who are struggling to survive because frankly it’s overwhelming to consider what we can do to help.

The truth is that all of our lives are diminished when some of us are suffering. And furthermore, it is a proven fact that generosity is related to happiness. Survey after survey reveal results like these: “People who report that their lives are mostly happy have these characteristics: they regularly give away at least ten percent of their income, they volunteer, they are generous in sharing of their time with friends and family, they are neighborly.”

Another report puts it this way: “People who practice generosity tend to know more people and have more meaningful relationships. Generosity creates and strengthens communities.” And, at a deeper level, “Practicing generosity reminds people that we live in a world of abundance and blessing.” (And the more we embrace that concept, the happier and healthier we are.).

Do you ever find yourself explaining to someone why you go to church? Why you belong? Why you give of your time and money? I am convinced that one of the very best reasons is this. Being a part of a church gives us hope at the same time that we are bringing more hope to the world. And we can do more together than any of us can do alone.

So far, we’ve been talking about what we do for those who are in need because of poverty. There are other needs too, of course, and our church seeks to address those as well. Over the last few years, we have been intentional about learning more about mental illness, about domestic violence, about addiction. We have outreach programs in place to help support people who are living with addiction and mental illness and their loved ones. When you give to this church, you are helping us make it possible to open our doors three times a week every week of the year, to there different AA groups. We are actively involved with several sober living facilities in Lorain County. We support Genesis House, the domestic violence shelter. Once a month we offer a support group for those who have a loved one living with mental illness; one of our members, Mike Carr, who is a professional counselor, gives his time each month to help convene this group along with our Stephen Ministers. Once a month, our Stephen Min-

isters offer a support group for those who are caregivers. Next month we are offering education on suicide prevention.

All of these programs are ways that we say to people within our church and outside our church, "We see you. You are not invisible and you are not alone. We care and we want to help." And that brings hope. Not every problem can be solved, but neither does it have to be shouldered alone.

Our ministry includes offering rides to church for those who cannot drive themselves (and we are always looking for more people willing to help), and delivering meals to those who are in need after a hospitalization. Our parish nurse and our Stephen Ministers visit those who are homebound and living in residential care facilities.

This is a picture I took from the top of the mountain where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount - there is now a church there called "Church of the Beatitudes." This picture looks out towards the Sea of Galilee from the side walkway next to the church. The Beatitudes themselves are each displayed on a walkway near the church - I took pictures of two of them.

The Beatitudes are not easy to understand. Why does Jesus say, in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor". Are we supposed to be poor? Why didn't he say, "Blessed are those who care for the poor?" Wouldn't that make more sense? There are many good interpretations and these words open themselves to multiple possibilities. It makes sense, for example, to realize that there are ways in which our material possessions weigh us down and keep us from relying on God. Yet we don't want to romanticize poverty.

Here's one way to think about our passage for today. What if the Beatitudes are a road map for life? Not a recipe, not a prescription - things usually aren't that linear or simple in the Bible. But rather a way to walk, a way to live, a map to follow? One writer puts it this way: [What if] "The way to Heaven is through poverty . . . the way to consolation is through genuine sorrow . . . the way to earthly possessions is through a gentle spirit that is neither stingy nor possessive . . . the way to satisfaction is through a hungering and thirsting for justice . . . the way to mercy is through mercy . . . the way to God is through the open, unobstructed, pure heart . . . the way to a full relationship with God is through the active practice of peace . . . the way to God's realm or Kingdom is through the struggle for right that leads through conflict, pain, and even death itself."

Jesus brought hope to those in need by simply noticing them. Not ignoring them. Not walking the other way when he saw them. No, instead, he sought them out. The man who was living with mental illness whom everyone called possessed. The woman everyone gossiped about because she'd been married five times. The children who were at the time considered property. The blind man who had to survive by begging. The woman so desperate for healing that she touched the bottom of the back of his clothing. Zaccheus who climbed up in a tree to see him. To everyone in need, Jesus said, "I see you. I notice you. You are important to me. Your story matters. Your life has dignity." Those words create life-changing hope. And they remind us how to treat each other, all of us fellow travelers.

Sources for this sermon:

Radical Charity, by Christopher Marlin-Warfield

"The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached," by William Quick