

WE CHOOSE HOPE: HOPE FOR UNITY
Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

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You can read a lot of conflicting commentary about what's wrong in our world today. It's not hard at all to find so-called experts who have the exact opposite opinions about most every important issue. What you don't hear anyone saying is that we are living in hopeful times. Ironically, sadly, that's one thing everyone seems to agree on. When this particular moment is being described, it's with words like "fearful, anxious, despairing, difficult."

So for us to engage in a conversation called "We Choose Hope" is decidedly countercultural.

What does it mean, to choose hope? It DOESN'T mean that we are sticking our heads in the sand and ignoring the needs of the world. Instead, we are acknowledging that while there are certainly some problems that are out of our control or sphere of influence, one thing we can choose is our perspective, our attitude. Hope is a choice. It is an orientation towards the world, a belief that we can make a difference, that God calls us to join in the work of compassion and justice and re-creation. It is this work for which we were made, and it is this way of life that brings us a sense of joy and meaning and purpose.

The central story of our Christian faith is the story of hope rising from despair, love winning over death and evil and fear. The butterflies you see in the display in our entryway remind us of the story of Easter. We are Easter people. Do we really have any choice other than hope?

One researcher writes this:“Hope literally opens us up. It removes the blinders of fear and despair and allows us to see the big picture. We become creative, unleashing our dreams for the future. This is because deep within the core of hope is the belief that things can change. No matter how awful or uncertain they are at the moment, things can turn out for the better. Possibilities exist. Belief in this better future sustains us. It keeps us from collapsing in despair. It infuses our bodies with the healing rhythms of positivity. It motivates us to tap into our signature capabilities and inventiveness to turn things around. It inspires us to build a better future.”

I believe that one of the purposes of the church is to be an incubator for hope, a place where we encourage one another, where we plant seeds - some of which will grow in our lifetime and some of which we will never see to fruition, but they are a sign that we believe in a better future. Here we engage in the actions that make a difference today — like feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, visiting the lonely, educating the next generation - AND we work towards addressing the needs for systemic changes that make a long-term difference for good.

We begin our conversations about hope with a focus on unity, because the work of hope is only real and only biblical if it is hope for ALL. If what I hope for is a better life for me, for my family, for my neighborhood, for people like me, that’s not what the Bible means by hope. There is no such thing as individual hope in the Bible; it is always communal. My life will be better when all lives are better. My life will be safer when everyone in my community experiences a sense of security. When the biblical prophets describe God’s vision, it’s always about a community in which those who are most vulnerable receive the care they need.

As people who claim biblical values, choosing hope means thinking in terms of “us” and “we” rather than in terms of “what’s best for me and mine.”

Our passage for this morning from the letter to the Ephesians insists that we are members of the same body, and therefore we have a responsibility toward one another. As Beau read it from the Message version: “In Christ’s body we’re all connected to each other, after all.” It’s true within the bonds of the church, and ideally we learn it here, but it’s also true for our larger community - indeed for the entire created universe. You’ve undoubtedly heard this quote from Martin Luther King: “We must learn to live together as brothers (and sisters) or perish together as fools.” He was talking about humanity; now we know that the same message could apply to plants and animals, water and air...but that’s a topic for a few weeks from now.

Here’s how one biblical commentator sees the meaning of the Ephesians passage: “The truth of our existence is that we really are each other’s keepers. We have an obligation to one another—particularly in the context of our mutual faith—to relate to each other with love and kindness and compassion. Make no mistake: it grieves our loving creator when we fail to do that. It grieves our creator when we act in ways that positively destroy the fabric of humanity that the Spirit weaves among us.”

If we believe that God is the creator of all of humanity, then we know that bickering and selfishness - not to mention bigotry, violence, terror and war - break God’s heart. Imagine seeing one of your children do violence against another.

There are people actively involved in the work of seeing past our differences and reminding us that the things we share a common humanity.

It happens sometimes after a disaster; such occasions can bring out the best in people. In August of 2017, Hurricane Harvey demolished the coastline of southeast Texas, bringing with it ferocious winds and record levels of rain and flooding - of course those records were challenged by the storms there again these past few days. Harvey drove thousands from their homes and led to millions of dollars of losses. I have a friend who was living in Austin at the time and he began observing how people from around the nation began flocking to Houston to offer their assistance. One Houston resident noticed, "For a moment, all people work together and forget their political, religious, and economic differences. Believers from across denominations work shoulder to shoulder to provide rescue and relief." People who might not be able to have a civil conversation with each other about anything meaningful discover a common bond while working side by side. It happens after every natural disaster, and it's a sign of hope — reminding us that most of us really do care about maintaining bonds of neighborliness.

In January of 2018, I attended the UCC Senior Minister's Conference in Florida, as I often do. One of the speakers was Eric Elnes, pastor of Countryside Community UCC in Omaha, Nebraska. . He talked about his congregation's recent decision to sell their building, raise several million dollars (I can't remember exactly - somewhere between 5 and 10, I believe) and move to a different location. Why? Not because they'd outgrown their space. For one reason only. They were invited to be a part of something that has never been done before, anywhere, in the history of the world - something called the Tri-Faith Initiative, a campus that includes a brand-new Muslim mosque, a brand-new Jewish synagogue, and a brand-new Christian church (happens to be UCC) - and an interfaith center. Four buildings on one campus connected by a walkway

called Abraham's walk. The friendship between the Islamic congregation and the Jewish congregation happened first, then the idea for the campus, and then the search for a Christian partner. They reached out to the UCC church at the same time that the UCC pastor Eric was feeling called to be a part of the initiative. I was riveted as he talked about how he approached his congregation with the idea. He showed a clip from their capital campaign video in which a young couple shared their enthusiasm for raising their children in this remarkable environment. I was moved by the entire story. I came home and said to Doug, "We need to plan a trip to Nebraska." He said, "OK, when's the next time Ohio State is playing football in Nebraska?" I looked it up, and we began making plans. This time next week I will be worshiping on the campus of the Tri-Faith initiative. My colleague Eric hopes that theirs won't be the only interfaith campus for long. He explains it in this clip from CNN - this is a two-minute news story which also features our ALUCC member, UCC President John Dorhauer at the groundbreaking ceremony.

The more we learn about one another, the more we learn to think in terms of WE and less in terms of "I" and "me." "In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all." Selfishness and fear don't have to have the last word. We don't have to cling to what we have, desperately holding on. Let us learn to live together as brothers and sisters, bound together in love.