

Celebrating the Living Word
Romans 5.1-8

Hope has been in the news. In our nation's capital, in a Senate hearing, the testimony of a former FBI director is hanging on the word *hope*. The testimony is that that the president *hoped* the FBI director would drop an investigation. And one group of people hears this and says, "Yes, that's a threat!" But another group says, "Hope? Hope is simply wishful thinking. There's no threat here."

Political candidates make big promises. And we vote, or don't, based on our *hope* that they will keep their promises. The former president built a campaign around *hope*. Some in this country embraced his vision of hope and others made fun of it because afterall, *hope* dwells in the realm of wishful thinking and fantasy. Our current president heard and named the *hopelessness* of so many people; his campaign made big promises...promises which gave *hope* to those who had none. And as it always happens in the political sphere, some are satisfied because their hope is fulfilled while others are disappointed by unfulfilled hope.

When it comes to faith, in our Romans passage there is no doubt in Paul's testimony that *hope* is real. And it's powerful. Hope is an expectation that we live into *as reality*. And the Hope that Paul is describing *does not disappoint!* That's a big promise. (A tweetable promise!)

This congregation calls itself *Fellowship of Hope*. How do we understand *hope*? What is our testimony? Is it real? Or does it belong in the category of unicorns?

In reality, we find ourselves using hope both as something real and as fantasy. Sometimes our hopes are expressions of threats and promise. And sometimes our hope is an expression of nothing more than wishful thinking.

The thing that stops me about Paul's words is their confidence, their undeniable certainty. The *hope* we have as resurrection people *does not disappoint*. Paul is sure. And he's

sending these words to the Roman church...words of assurance, words of encouragement, words of instruction.

How do we, 2,000 years later, hear these words? Are they assurance and instruction? Or a wishful religious fantasy?

During Easter, some of you gave your testimonies of resurrection. When the worship planning group talked about doing this, I don't think we anticipated how difficult of an assignment we were giving. And I find myself still thinking about that. We're a Fellowship of *Hope*. We're people of the resurrection. We know this. And yet we aren't practiced in talking about it. It is not our habit to speak as witnesses to resurrection. Why is that? How have we been formed...or perhaps de-formed?

Paul begins chapter 5 writing, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith." He makes it sound like of course this is something we know. But I wonder if we really do have a sense of *being justified by faith*. I will say that here, at Fellowship of Hope, we are learning to live *being justified by faith*. Or, what is perhaps more accurate is that we are *un-learning* to live being justified by right belief, *un-learning* to live being justified by right living, and *un-learning* to live being justified by avoiding sin.

We have been formed in a time and place when *being justified by faith* is about a formulaic intellectual assent. When I was in my teens, the question was, "Are you born again." And the world was quickly divided into those of us who were born again and those who weren't. A nice, neat dualism of believers and non-believers. People of faith and people of no-faith.

A reaction to faith being defined by right belief is to emphasize right living. And there's much value in that. I like the story of the person who is asked, "Are you a Christian?" And she responds, "I don't know. Ask my neighbor." We Mennonites, and we here at Fellowship of Hope have put following Jesus at the center of our living. It's our strength. But like all

strengths, it can become our weakness. We are so focused on following Jesus, we are so Jesus-centered that we lose sight of our Triune God. We slip into thinking that *being justified by faith* depends on *me*, on *my* choices, on *my* following Jesus just right.

And then there's sin. (What can I say about sin?!) There is this notion that sin is shameful and terrible. And that gets internalized so we live with an impossible expectation of trying to live without sin. The fear is that God can't love us until we have gotten rid of our sin. And so we live with the guilt and shame that the cost of my being a sinner, the cost of *being justified by faith*, is Jesus' death.

Thank God for these wonderful words of assurance and instruction from Paul! They are good news for sinners and cause for great joy! Listen again. "Therefore, since we are justified by *faith*...since we are reconciled by *faith*..." Hear this, Paul does *not* say that we are restored to right relationship by right belief, or right living, or by being sinless. We are justified by faith...by trust. Do we hear it? Our hard work and effort doesn't justify us! Our justification, our reconciliation grows out of our reliance on and our relaxing into and living into the love and aliveness of our Triune God.

Paul continues his words of encouragement and instruction, teaching us the formation of Christmas. Like the angels to the shepherds, Paul proclaims to the Romans and to us: "we boast in our *hope* of sharing the glory of God." God's glory, the honor and power that we saw in the person of Jesus, the Son of God, is ours to claim and to share. This *hope* isn't timid or fanciful; it is bold, demanding, a lived reality. It's a way of being that radiates light and beauty. It is this hope that formed Lowry. Whenever he was asked, "How are you?" he beamed as he responded, "Splendid." And he was!

This hope is also a way of being and living that is costly, a way of living that will take us through lenten wildernesses. But Easter *always* follows! "We also boast in our sufferings,"

Paul writes, “knowing that being pressed and pressured by life yields endurance and endurance character, and character hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” *Being justified by faith* means that when life is pressing us, rather than complaining and turning to despair, we *trust* that we are being shaped and formed as resurrection people. We have confidence that we are already—completely, wholly, utterly—already beloved daughters and sons of God. We are always splendid!

And finally Paul brings us to Pentecost: “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.” We are not only resurrection people, we are people of Pentecost!

Our splendid and glorious participation in the aliveness and love of God is possible because the Spirit of the living God has already been given. And Spirit is pouring love into the world, into us. We are not the creators of the love that is in us—we are the recipients! The Spirit is pouring love into our hearts, spilling love on the world! What a magnificent, wonderful mess! What wonderful words! Love has been spilled! The Spirit is blowing and breathing Love, into us, among us, around us. How very splendid! It is not our right belief or our earnest efforts that *justify us*. No, it is because the Spirit is pouring out *Love!* It is this Spirit of the Triune God that is powering us, creating us, calling all creation into new life. Our response is simply to relax. And to participate!

As participants, we aren't passive. Nor are we bystanders. We become active, engaged participants, powered by the Holy Spirit, partners in God's work in the world. But it is never our effort that is justifying and reconciling the world...it is not our right belief or our living sinless lives that is bringing new life into the world. It is always the creativity and aliveness, the healing and liberating, it is the beauty and love of the Spirit!

But there's one more thing that we mustn't miss in these wonderful words that Paul is writing: "For *while we were still weak*, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." Now, one reading of this might be that a proper response is duty, that we now *owe* God. Another reading is to think that Paul is talking to *them*, to the Romans and other un-believers. But not me; I was never weak. Because of my privilege, which includes having grown up in the church, it's hard for me to see myself in the category of *weak*. But if I can't see poverty at my core, then I will also miss the amazing and gratuitous love of God...a love that has already been poured out for us, for all bodies, believers and un-believers, people of faith and people without faith.

God already loved us, already loves us. Jesus' death didn't make us loveable or presentable to God. God loved us before. In Jesus' death, we see love poured out. And we also see the fruit of endurance and character and *hope*. The fruit is life—eternal, abundant, resurrection life powered by the Spirit of Triune God. The fruit is love—loving-his-enemies-love; washing-the-feet-of-Judas-love; forgiving-those-who-were killing-him-love—love poured out by Spirit. The death of Jesus isn't the end of the story...the end of the story is love and life powered by the Spirit.

On Pentecost, César García, MWC general secretary, sent an email. In his closing paragraph, he writes:

It is the Spirit of God that prays through us, loves and forgives, serves and works for peace. It is the Spirit of God that is the source of our joy and enables us to live in freedom, giving our lives for others. It is the Spirit of God that provides us with a new identity as beloved of the Father thus freeing us from the slavery of pleasing others. It is the Spirit of God that fills us with [Her] **power** so that we may wash the feet even of those who hurt us.

Fellowship of Hope! You *are* already a glorious and splendid fellowship of Hope. You *are* powered by the living, loving Spirit! May we boast in our hope! May we be bold in our

hope. And may we relax and trust and participate...trusting the Spirit to do Her work...in us...in the world. And powered by love, may participate in the work of our Triune God in the world.