

The Courage to Hope
Matthew 6:25-33; Psalm 126
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The United Church of Christ does have a Book of Worship that we ministers can use as a reference when designing various worship services. The book contains all the things you would expect—orders for baptism, confirmation, marriage, death, and ordination. There are also services for renewing vows, adopting a child, or saying goodbye to someone who is moving away. You might be surprised that there is an order for making confession, and that I have used it. There is an order for footwashing and many other of the liturgical practices that some of you don't think are very UCC (though they've been in our Book of Worship for decades). There is also a service of divorce.

This to me is the most surprising thing in the Book of Worship, though, if you think about it for even a little bit, it makes sense. When a couple marries, they usually do it in a religious ceremony and then file the papers with the state. Marriage is both a religious and a civil institution. But when couples divorces, they usually dissolve the legal contract in a court of law and never take any steps to dissolve the religious bond. It makes sense, then, that there would be a religious ceremony for ending a marriage.

I have never used this order of worship, and I can't imagine many divorces where the couple is on good enough terms to choose to use this service, but I do think it would be interesting to use sometime. It might, in some circumstances, be helpful.

The introduction to the service explains its purpose: it is for a couple to "acknowledge responsibility for their separation, affirm the good that continues from the previous relationship, and promise in the presence of God, family, and supportive friends to begin a new relationship." The introduction does warn that this service should be done with sensitivity and with advance preparation (Which I think is something of an understatement). The introduction also points out that this service can be particularly helpful if there are children from the marriage, as the couple can commit to their continued care of the children, even as the marriage is being dissolved.

The prayer time in this service, begins with these words:

O God, make us aware of your presence. You have blessed us in all our moments: of joining, of relating, of intending, and of beginning. Be with us in our times of separating and of ending, releasing us from those vows we can no longer keep; we ask in Christ's name. Amen.

That, I think, is a very appropriate and lovely prayer. It reminds us that God is with us in our beginnings and our endings.

Our closest relationships often bring us pain. Broken friendships, harsh treatment by a loved one, fighting within the family—all of these deeply affect us. This summer we've been talking about relationships, and as we draw this series, entitled "The Work of Love," to a close, today I want to focus on what happens when those relationships go through difficulties or even come to an end.

Love hurts. I can think back over my career to so many different people hurting because they love. The lovesick sixteen year olds. The college student trying to figure out if their first relationship is over. The widow in deep grief over the loss of her husband. The newly divorced who wonder what comes next. The senior adult man who is afraid that he is marrying again too soon after the death of his wife. The twenty-something who attempted suicide because of his loneliness. The person coping with being HIV-positive and how that affects his dating life. And so many more.

Loving another person makes us vulnerable. Loving another person is risky. We open ourselves up and allow another person to share a part of who we are. When we lose that person through death or breaking up, the pain cuts deeply.

What, then, are the Christian practices that can help to sustain us when our relationships come to an end?

Back in 2004, my very first relationship with another man came to a painful end. I had risked everything for this relationship—my career, my family, my friendships. In the first few months it was filled with such joy and excitement, and I was newly confident as I was finally exploring my own identity. So, when the relationship suddenly came crashing down, it was more than just a break-up, it felt as if my whole world was falling apart.

Ten years later, I can see much more clearly what I did wrong in the situation, something that I could not understand at the time. At the time, I was deeply depressed, the worst depression I've ever experienced.

At the end of June 2004, I went to Birmingham, Alabama for the General Assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. As I did every year, I bought a bunch of books and went back to the hotel room to peruse them. One of the books I bought was Jurgen Moltmann's *In the End – The Beginning: The Life of Hope*. I had not read any Moltmann before, so I was merely anticipating that this little book would give me a good introduction to his thought. Sitting on my hotel bed I began reading the introduction, and I pretty much didn't put the book down until I had finished it two days later. I didn't attend any workshops or breakout sessions during the conference; I spent almost the entire time reading that book. Its message about resurrection was what I needed in that moment.

The theme of the book is that the central tenet of the Christian faith is that with every end there is a new beginning. Ours is a faith of hope, a faith that looks to the future. Here's an excerpt from the paragraph that first grabbed my attention:

No one is perfect, and few people succeed in achieving an unbroken continuity in their lives. Again and again we come up against limits, and experience the failure of our plans for life, the fragmentary nature of our good beginnings and, not least, the guilt which makes life impossible for us. The essential thing in experiences of life like this is the new beginning. If a child falls over it is no bad thing, because it then learns to get up

again. Christian faith is faith in the resurrection, and the resurrection is literally just that: rising up again. It gives us the strength to get up, and the creative freedom to begin something once more in the midst of our on-going history, something fresh. . . . 'Christians are the eternal beginners', . . . that is the best thing that can ever be said about believers, lovers and the hopeful.

The Christian story rallies us to rise up, look to the future, and begin again. For each day is a new beginning, each day is a resurrection.

In today's gospel passage, Jesus warns us not to worry. Instead, we should trust that God will provide for us. When a relationship ends, we can spend much of our time focused backwards, on the loss. One way to interpret Jesus' message in today's gospel is that we shouldn't waste our time and energy worrying over the past. The past cannot be undone and relived. It is settled. To remain focused on the past is to sink through regret into despair. Much like Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, we can sink into the "Slough of Despond" composed of "many fears and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions.

Jesus encourages us not to worry, but instead to strive for the kingdom of God, which is a vision of life filled with abundance provided by God's blessing.

To quit worrying and to quit looking backward, and instead to move forward into a new beginning takes courage.

I am convinced that courage is the most important virtue necessary for living the Christian life. I think it's courage that sustains us on the journey when everything looks difficult. It is courage that overcomes fear, anxiety, and despair. It's courage that nurtures our joy, our faith, and our love.

It's easy to be a cynic in our world. The news, especially in recent weeks, has been filled with foreboding. It's easy for us to see the negative, to focus on the bad, and to become overwhelmed by evil and suffering. For us to live as people of hope takes courage, because the world wants us to be cynical, skeptical, and ironic. With courage we can look beyond the bad things in our own lives and the bad things in the world around us and focus instead on those small signs of hope and joy.

We cannot sustain our love relationships or begin again when they have ended without hope. The task is too difficult. Negativity will destroy God's work and our work of love. Look at today's Psalm. Here is a song written by people whose fortunes have not yet been restored, but they dream of that day, a day when their mouths will be filled with laughter and on their tongues will be shouts of joy. Though that day has not arrived, they are already acting like it has.

How can we be like the people in today's Psalm? How can we quit worrying and looking to the past, but instead rely upon God and look to the future, beginning again? How do we become hopeful in the midst of pain? How do we muster courage when we are sinking into despair?

I believe that the work of love rests upon spiritual practices that both sustain our Christian faith and our relationships. That's one reason this sermon series has focused on some of the skills we must learn as Christians—celebrating with our friends, practicing humility,

forgiving one another, giving and receiving in marriage.

When I am hurting, I retreat to the spiritual practices that sustain me—things like prayer and meditation, a morning walk, yoga, deep breathing. Sometimes I lie on the ground and focus my breath and pray the ancient Jesus prayer, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.”

I also enjoy reading poetry, listening to my favourite music, and eating chocolate. Michael learned soon after he first moved in with me, that if he came home and found me curled in a chair reading Wendell Berry, while R. E. M. was blasting on the stereo, and a few different bars of dark chocolate were on the end table beside me, then I had clearly had a very stressful day.

Friends are also important. Colleagues, mentors, church members, all those people who form my spiritual community. All those people who provide comfort, encouragement, and wisdom when I need it. Cultivating those relationships is essential, because sometimes you need to draw upon them for any new beginning.

After that first relationship with another guy ended, and I was in my depression, a tight social circle formed around me of other people in my church. They had me over for lunch and dinner, took me out drinking, invited me to pool parties, and were willing to sit and listen to my long, sad, and I now must admit sometimes pathetic, ramblings. Those friends prodded me back to life.

In my life it was the combination of friends, spiritual practices, and the hopeful message of the Christian faith which gave me the courage to begin again.

When you experience loss, I encourage you to spend time with the spiritual practices that bring you peace and rest. And with the people who nurture you. These activities will draw you into the presence and the power of God. I believe that from my own experience.

Jesus says “Do not worry.” The Psalm looks forward with joy to when our fortunes will be restored. Christians are the eternal beginners. May your faith give you the courage to hope.