

Hope
2 Corinthians 1:1-11
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It is the New Year and everyone is making their resolutions. Michael is usually very intentional about his. At some point in the first week of January he will ask me what mine are and tell me what his are.

The problem is, I, generally, don't make New Year's resolutions. I figured out a while back that I'm one of those people they simply aren't effective for. Oh, I can, at various times, resolve to do something and work at changing my behavior, but just because it's the New Year doesn't seem to give me any special impetus. Plus, it's difficult to be anything but be lazy in the cold January weather.

Most resolutions, of course, are ways for us to improve ourselves—we want to become more generous, more organized, lose weight, achieve some work goal, spend more time with family, pray more, etc.

But most people abandon their resolutions by the second week of February, it seems. Our normal lives get in the way. You faithfully go to the gym three days a week after work until there's that one day when you have to fix dinner before going to an evening meeting, so you skip the gym. And then it is easier to skip it the next time and eventually it's mid-March and you have realize you haven't been in three weeks. At that point maybe going to the gym becomes your Lenten discipline in one more attempt to develop the habit.

Though new year's resolutions may not be the most effective strategy, I applaud our efforts to improve ourselves.

This week I was reading the mystical visions of the medieval writer Hildegard of Bingen. By the way, Hildegard was also a famous composer and wine maker. When I was in Germany in 1995 we visited her vineyard, which still exists, and tasted the wine. It was quite good. Unfortunately I broke my Hildegard of Bingen wine tasting glass about a decade ago.

In the book she wrote interpreting her visions, she writes about the human need to improve ourselves, basing this desire upon the image of God that is within all of us. She wrote:

How could the very great glory and honor that was given to you go unused as if they were nothing and not motivate you at all? Gold ought to be tried in fire and precious stones ought to be cleansed and polished. Likewise, all things ought to be searched for eagerly in all things. O foolish people, who were made in the image and likeness of God, how can you abide without trying out your image and likeness?

According to Hildegard, we have been born with the original blessing of God, and the spiritual journey of our lives is to awaken that blessing so that we will shine with a "brightness similar to the dawn."

How do we shine? How do we become works of light? “Become strong,” Hildegard wrote. We must develop the strengths of God’s image within us. And these, according to her, are the virtues.

For the next seven weeks we will be exploring some of the virtues, for it is the virtues that lead to the good life. Contemporary theologian Stanley Hauerwas wrote, “the virtues . . . provide the habits that make us capable of living lives of joy.”

So, in this new year, in this time of resolutions and our attempts to improve ourselves, we are going to talk about “The Good Life” and what we can do to live that life of joy, radiating with the glory of God.

One reason we fail at our new year’s resolutions is that we don’t develop the habits necessary to maintain them over the long haul. And that’s what the virtues are—habits of character, developed over a lifetime of work. We don’t simply become honest, caring, or generous when we decide to be that type of person. Instead, it takes many years of intentionally practicing the things that honest, caring, and generous people do so that those actions become our very nature. Truly virtuous people don’t need to think about what to do, they do the good naturally because that is the type of person they have become.

This developmental nature of the virtues should relieve our anxieties. If we aren’t fully the person we want to be right now, that’s okay, because it doesn’t happen simply or quickly. It takes learning and work and evaluating even when we think we’ve done well in order to become our best selves.

This fall when I was teaching the virtues to the freshmen in my philosophy class at Creighton University, I encouraged them to look at the mentors and models in their lives and then to decide now what type of person they wanted to be in the future. If they wanted to become a generous person, say, then they should start even now doing the things that a generous person does. They should intentionally begin developing the habits that over years will shape them into the person they hope to become.

The virtues are skills much like a sport or a craft that we learn. Even if you have great natural talent, it still takes you years of effort at practice and learning to become a great football player or carpenter or opera singer. To become a virtuous person requires similar effort and practice. The work becomes habit and habit eventually becomes part of your character.

So, what virtues lead to the good life as we understand it as Christians? Well, there are many we could talk about—honesty, generosity, compassion, and humility are all examples. But in this series I’m going to focus on the seven virtues that often dominate any list of virtues. Four come from classical Greek culture—Justice, Courage, Temperance, and Prudence—while the other three are called the theological virtues—Faith, Hope, and Charity.

Because today is the second Sunday in the short twelve day season of Christmas, I thought we should focus on hope. Hope seems especially relevant after our Advent series “Be Not Afraid.”

In the passage I read a moment ago from II Corinthians, Paul writes about some affliction that he has undergone. He never names what that suffering was, and we don’t have

any clear idea what he was writing about. Maybe the people who received the letter would have known from other contacts with Paul and his circle of friends. We do not know the specifics of the affliction, but we do know that it caused him to despair; he felt “utterly, unbearably crushed.” ()

I know that many of you have experienced those sorts of moments in your lives, so you sympathize with how Paul felt.

What helped him to survive the affliction was a growing confidence in God. Because Paul reached bottom, he couldn't rely upon himself, but could only rely upon God to rescue him. His despair turned to hope.

One thing to be clear of when discussing the virtues—the virtuous person does not escape the difficulties of life. Rather, they learn how to bear reality. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, writing about courage, says that the courageous person is still afraid in dangerous situations. The person who isn't afraid during danger is someone who is foolhardy, and that is a vice. The courageous person is still afraid, but her fear does not overwhelm her like it does the coward. The difference between the courageous person and the coward isn't that one fears and the other doesn't. The difference is confidence. Despite her fear, the courageous person is confident.

By analogy the hopeful person isn't the person devoid of anxiety about the future, rather they are the person who is confident in the face of anxiety.

It is said that hope is “the expectation of something better tomorrow.” Hope is more than an emotion or a feeling. More even than an optimistic temperament. True hope is tested by difficulty and anxiety. True hope is having the confidence that something good is on its way, even when right now things don't look that way.

For the Christian, there is some specific content to our hope, what we hope for. We hope for God's vision of the world to come to fulfillment. For peace and justice, mercy and compassion, abundance and joy to defeat the powers of death and destruction. Actually, we believe that they have already been defeated, in the resurrection, and that we live in the meantime as they take their last gasps. So, when we are in the situation of despair, like Paul we can hope not simply in our own abilities but in the power of God to rescue us.

There is a unity to the virtues, meaning that they go hand-in-hand with one another. The truly hopeful person will also be someone who has developed faith and courage, wisdom and understanding. They will know what to hope for in any given circumstances. They will not long for that which is impossible. Their longing will not lead to them abandoning reality. Those would be “false hopes.”

What are some things we can do to practice hope? We can notice the good when it occurs in small things, like the kindness of a stranger. We can practice gratitude, giving thanks for all the good things in our lives. We can avoid unnecessary negativity, and there is way too much unnecessary negativity in most of our lives. We can celebrate and enjoy life when the opportunity arises. We can quit being down on ourselves and quit being so critical of everyone else. We can quit playing the victim, if that is a problem for us. We can limit our exposure to people who bring us down and spend our time and energy on those who encourage us. We can learn to handle mistakes and setbacks with patience and confidence.

These are a few general examples. We could probably imagine more specific, targeted

goals. I also know that whatever spiritual practices sustain you will also help in the cultivation of the good and virtuous life, be that prayer, hiking, gardening, singing, yoga, etc.

There is maybe no more hopeful thing than planting and tending a garden. In the spring, getting your hands dirty as you plant the seeds, in soil that you've already prepared and nurtured. Then watering, feeding, and otherwise caring for the plant as it grows. So that weeks or even months later you might enjoy the fruit of your labor. That is hope.

The church I pastored in Oklahoma City was named the "Cathedral of Hope." We were not a cathedral in the normal sense of the word, like St. Cecilia's which rises above the trees and can be seen for miles around. We didn't even have our own building. The mother church who founded us did have a grand building and still has plans, designed by the great architect Philip Johnson, to build a glorious cathedral one day. But our satellite congregation in Oklahoma City was new, small, and struggling financially.

Though we weren't a brick and mortar cathedral, there was a vision of a virtual cathedral. We didn't have literal towers rising above the trees for everyone to notice, but our aim was for our witness to be like that, something rising above the mundane world, drawing people to a different way of being. And the virtue we practiced and embodied was hope. We believed that if we embodied hope, then we could change the future.

This was a bold vision for a small group of people. Add to it that we were 95% lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender and living in Oklahoma where elected officials enjoyed using us as rhetorical punching bags. Much less the possibility of physical danger. While I was pastoring there a couple of men who were connected to the Aryan Brotherhood kidnapped and brutally murdered a gay man from the city street where the gay clubs are located. Though the sheriff wanted to pursue that as a hate crime, he couldn't, as Oklahoma law didn't include anti-gay violence in the state's hate crimes law.

We lived in an environment where weekly we were being discriminated against by our families, politicians, businesses, and other Christians. Yet despite those difficulties, we gathered every week for worship. We sang praises to God. We celebrated the Eucharist. We carried the Christ light into and out of the sanctuary. We read scripture. And I preached that we were the ones who had discerned the will of God. We were the ones embodying the gospel. Our little group of people could be the leaven that changed all those other people—the other churches, our families, our workplaces, even the laws that worked against us.

In other words, every single week our worship was itself an expression of hope. Another opportunity to practice hope. A chance to be confident in our expectation of a better tomorrow, despite whatever difficulties we encountered today.

In 2008, the week before Easter, a state representative in Oklahoma said that gay people were a bigger threat to America than Islamic terrorists were. I stood before my congregation and began my sermon "Today I stand here proclaiming to you that God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the grave." Then I preached about the liberating, healing, redemptive power of the resurrection that had already defeated the powers-that-be and their ways of death and destruction. I concluded my sermon saying "It is with passionate faith that today I stand here and proclaim to you that when God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the grave that God raised you up to a new life. With courage and hope let us go forth and bear witness that we are alive!"

And that is one example of what it means to be a people who hope.

In our pursuit of the good life, a life of joy, radiating with the glory of God, one way we achieve that is by developing the habit of expecting a better tomorrow, being confident in the face of today's anxieties because of God's gifts to us. Go and be hopeful.