

“Gentle Hope”
A Sermon Delivered
at
Plymouth Congregational Church
on
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by
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1 Peter 3: 13 – 17

Years ago I remember watching Billy Graham on TV at one of his crusade rallies. It was vintage Graham he had worked up the crowd to a fever pitch. Suddenly he turned to the congregation and asked.

“If being Christian were a crime could anyone find enough evidence to convict you?”

When First Peter was written that wasn't an idle question. People were being put to death for their faith on a regular basis. In fact the whole reason this little epistle was written was to try to give encouragement to those who were being singled out and persecuted because of their faith.

Just this past week I read an account about a priest in Baghdad who was beheaded for being Christian. His crime was his willingness to walk into harm's way in order to house the homeless, visit the imprisoned and feed the hungry. That is precisely the ministry to which Christ has called every one of us.

We hear these grim stories and we understand the grim expressions and strident affirmations of those who would be Christian in difficult times, then and now.

As a young man fresh out of seminary I recall a colleague who wanted to remove the choir from his church because he saw no cause for singing. His was the sort of congregation where the Billy Graham question would have really resonated.

“If it were a crime to be Christian then could they find enough evidence to convict you?”

My friend would immediately have offered up his determined despair and painful sincerity.

But Peter's letter was written into a time when living one's faith was, at least on the face of things, even more dangerous than it is in a 21st century world.

Peter wrote: “ Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

This suggests that faith when lived is something more aptly compared to a hope than it is to a crime.

What might be the shape of such hope?

This little letter of First Peter makes that pretty clear. **Our faith and our living are grounded in the sure and certain hope that Jesus Christ the Messiah knows us by name and will not abandon us.**

We are not alone and we will not be alone no matter what the future holds.

This is not the sort of hope that we reference when we say we hope that our team wins the game. This is the sort of hope that opens tomorrow to the limitless love of a God who came, lived in our midst, and promises to never leave our side.

This is the hope born of the savior who has gone on ahead of us to prepare a place for us. A savior who is so trustworthy that even death itself cannot deter him.

So if I may be so bold as to combine Billy Graham and First Peter then I come up with the following question:

“Can we live so faithfully that people see and wonder at the hope that shows through?”

I know people who do.

Have you ever gone down to the Homeless Assistance Shelter and looked not only into the faces of those being served but also at the faces of those who are doing the serving.

Some are determined—all are focused—but now and then there will be a smile. Not the vapid countenance of “Have a nice day,” but rather the acknowledgement of the rich honor that it is to be God’s hands in the service of creation.

Or Bruce and Martha Clinton on the day when they decided to substantially contribute to the restoration of church organ. It wasn’t a grim gift born of obligation. It was rather a faithful generosity grounded in the sure and certain hope that this church and its music were worthy of support.

Last Thursday evening at about 9:00 PM, I was standing beside Park House as Rob Bobson was pounding a well tube down into the rock some 25 feet. It was hard work and Rob was grinning. It was what he could do and he wasn't doing it because he had to. He was living in the hope that the well he was creating would irrigate flowers and bushes and lawns and make this little corner of creation more beautiful. Through the sweat and the sore muscles came a smile that was both hopeful and contagious.

The other morning I was sitting in my office working on the budget figures when I was interrupted by the sound of singing out in front of the church office building. It was about 8:30, but no matter, the singing was joyous and enthusiastic.

It was Abel—our associate pastor.

All I could think of was Peter.

“Explain yourself young man. Clearly you must not understand all the problems of this day—for if you did then you surely wouldn't be singing.”
WRONG AGAIN TOM!

Peter's point precisely—the hope that is God's faithful gift is best expressed in song—not in dogged determined verbiage.

The first challenge of today's text is to recognize that faith is not a crime for which we are prosecuted but rather is a hope with which we are blessed.

The second is how are we to live that hope in such a way that it is visible to those of our fellows who are on this pilgrimage of life at our side?

How are we to join the ranks of those who smile over the food at the shelter or feel joy in the midst of generous giving or sing right into the face of a new and challenging day?

There are no simple answers to these questions.

I'm not advocating giddy smiley faces for everyone's lapel pin. Hope is not a silly grin but it is a very precious and very powerful God given gift that we too often brush aside.

How do we gently account for the hope that is in us?

The grieving parent who has lost a child in the service of our country. The grieving parent who turns pain into service and service into love and hope, who sees in the faces of the wounded and suffering the opportunity to bring the God's hope into battered lives.

The elder who sees in the stumbling growth of a teenager the grace and promise of God's endless love. Sees, and rather than condemn, finds instead a smile creeping across her face.

Peter wrote into a time of hardship and persecution and he reminded us that God's greatest gift to us was not a body of law and doctrine. God's gift to us was the son God loved, was the son who loved us.

It is that gift that ultimately gives form and substance to the hope within each one of us.

If we can treasure that hope within our own living then we just may be able to live in such a way that someone else may actually ask us about it.

And when they do ask we shall respond with gentleness and reverence and we will invite them to find God's gift of hope, find it and make it their own.

Amen