

Why I Remain in the Greatest of Hope

Romans 5:1-5

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Most of what I know about hope I have learned from others: theologians, extraordinary citizens, and regular folks. I am grateful for everyone who has contributed to my understanding of hope because hope is my daily bread; it's what keeps me going when the economy slumps; it's what keeps me going when I receive a discouraging e-mail; it's what keeps me going when things don't seem to be turning out for the best. For me, hope is something far beyond the power of positive thinking; it has nothing to do with wishful thinking; it is a knowing that whether we live or whether we die, our lives belong to God, our lives matter, our lives are sacred.

The Apostle Paul has been my teacher of theology. He reminds us that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope. When he says this, he is speaking with the authority that arises out of personal experience. He has not lived in an ivory tower all his life. By the time he writes this letter to the Romans, he has suffered a number of personal indignities, a number of imprisonments, and he suffered from an unnamed malady some scholars believe may have been epilepsy. He endures because he has this wild belief that the love of God has been poured into his heart, right up to the brim, and that the love of God will be sufficient to face what must be faced. It is in facing up to these sufferings, changing what he can, accepting what he can't, that he emerges as a hope-filled person, certain that whether he lives or whether he dies, nothing will be able to separate him from the love of Christ.

I remain in the greatest of hope because I see people of all ages and stations in life discovering that their lives matter. Next Sunday, we will confirm 26 young men and women in their faith. I've started to think of our year together as a miracle year, not because they've all behaved so well, but because many of these young people last September weren't so sure that their lives mattered, and now they do. They know. They know that they matter.

In 1933, a girl, Ellen, was born in a village in Liberia, West Africa. She grew up as many African girls do, without a hint that her life mattered to anyone. Her passion for peace and justice grew inside her as she watched her country disintegrate through a succession of military coups and armed rebellions and outright genocide. As she watched the slaughter of innocents, she knew that somehow her life mattered. Imprisoned for treason because she dared to challenge the tyranny of Liberia's dictators, Ellen endured; her character deepened; and she discovered hope. In 2006, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president of Liberia, the first woman to hold such high office in all of Africa. I remain in the greatest of hope because of the Ellen's of this world.

I remain in the greatest of hope because I see people of all ages and stations in life discovering that their lives are sacred, shaped and molded by God's own hands. This could almost be the mission statement of our Board for Discipleship Education; that all children would make this discovery; that their lives are sacred, made and shaped by God's own hands. This is why I don't hesitate for a moment to invite our members and friends to pledge a generous proportion of their income to their church, so that we can train teachers and provide resources, and offer a meaningful ministry beginning with the youngest of children.

I remain in the greatest of hope when I see hundreds of people participating in the Relay for Life and hundreds more involved in the purchase of a pink craft for the girl's crew team to row, both efforts to take on cancer and to celebrate the sacredness of the lives of those who have died of cancer and those who are living with cancer. Have you seen the pink shell on the Connecticut River? Inside are inscribed 90 names, 90 sacred names, names of 90 people who have come to know through the suffering of cancer and the enduring with cancer that their lives are holy.

I stood on the inside of the circle at the Relay for Life and watched cancer survivors walk a victory lap. I recognized so many of the survivors, so many from South Church. I found myself clapping my hands and not stopping until they were numb. I checked in with team Kristen and found there the Nolans and the Andersons and a flock of others, all gathered to announce with laps of walking and with burning luminaros and with signs and posters how sacred each life is. This is why I remain in the greatest of hope.

I remain in the greatest of hope because I see people of all ages and stations in life stepping outside of their comfort zones. I see a Christian wanting to befriend a Muslim, a Muslim ready to befriend a Jew, a Jew open to a friendship with a Christian. I see people stepping outside of their comfort zones, a girl reaching out to dry a boy's tears, a local doctor flying to Haiti to share his skill in the midst of chaos, a mom filling out an application to the Alternate Route to Certification for teaching elementary school, a dad traipsing off on a Scout campout never having pitched a tent in his life, a daughter surrendering 12 inches of her golden locks for the sake of one who needs a wig. Everywhere I look I see my neighbors stepping out of their comfort zones in order to become more fully human, more fully whole, in order to taste the sweetness of God's salvation. This is why I remain in the greatest of hope.

I remain in the greatest of hope because when I look up at the cross and see that it is empty, I see that death does not have the last word. I see that life transcends all things, even death itself. The empty cross is a sign to me that I have nothing to fear, that the one who died on the cross has gone ahead to prepare the way for the rest of us. The empty cross is a sign of hope announcing the Resurrection, celebrating a God who brings light to darkness, joy to sorrow, and liberation to oppression.

These are some of the reasons why I remain in the greatest of hope. I pray that you do, too. Amen