

THE TUNE WITHOUT THE WORDS

Reflections on Hope

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First Parish of Needham

Reading: “Hope Is the Thing with Feathers” by Emily Dickinson

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune—without the words,
And never stops at all,
And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.
I've heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.*

Reading: Mark 4:1-8

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”

Nearly every time I watch a news report on the presidential campaigns, I hear two words: “hope” and “experience.” These words have become quite charged politically, to the point that they automatically associate people with a particular candidate. What I find interesting is that the opposite of hope in these current discussions is not despair. What we have discovered from this campaign season is that the opposite of hope is experience. A recent *New York Times* editorial noted that the campaigns have done something new in this respect. Experience has come to mean, “abandon all hope ye who enter here.” Hope, in contrast, has come to mean idealistic dreaming disconnected from the real world. And right now, the Democratic Party is split over whether it believes in hope or experience. It would be nice to find a candidate in the near future. But it is my sincere wish that we do not make any final decisions about whether we believe in hope or experience.

It is true that hope and experience don't easily fit together. But that's not because they are running against each other in the primaries. While politics are quite interesting right now, the campaigns are not what I want to focus on today. “Hope,” as Emily Dickinson reminds us in her poem, is the thing “that perches in the soul.” In other words, it touches a truth about human beings that is deeper than politics. This deeper dimension is what I would like to talk about this morning.

Today is Palm Sunday. In the Christian tradition, it is a day of intense expectation. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt as people put palm branches in his path. This was a deeply symbolic moment. The Hebrew Scriptures said that the Messiah would come riding a colt or donkey, and would be greeted with celebration. During the time of Jesus, the Jewish people had a lot to hope for. They were under the oppressive political and economic influence of Rome. They hoped that a Messiah or king would come and throw off the yoke of foreign rule.

So the passion of Jesus starts out as a story about the fulfillment of this messianic anticipation. It starts out as a story about what people think about the Messiah of Israel. And then, five days later, it becomes what no person would have expected for the Messiah—his violent execution. It becomes a story about his trial, humiliation, and crucifixion. It moves from joyous anticipation into the territory of dashed hopes and broken expectations.

Isn't this the story of hope? Isn't this exactly what experience teaches again and again: that we shouldn't have hope, that hopes will only be crushed? In our reading, Emily Dickinson writes: "sore must be the storm / that could abash that little bird." In my experience, life is about a lot of sore

storms. In fact, I think that there is no shortage of storms that could abash that little bird called “hope.”

Last year I worked on the Samaritans Suicide Hotline. It was not nearly as difficult or wrenching as it may sound. Mostly, I would chat with people about their day, or about some problem that they were having with their spouse or parents. It was actually very mundane. But every once and a while I would get what we called a “medical emergency.” This meant that the person was in the process of taking her life or would take it shortly after our phone conversation ended.

Hopelessness has a sound. I could tell when that thing with feathers had perished, when someone was living with the reality of crushed expectations and dashed hopes. There is a heaviness, a quiet to each word that promises no words after it. I remember talking with one man—I will call him Matt—who had recently been diagnosed with cancer. His wife had died a year previous and he had no family. He was looking at another few months of life before he died alone.

The first time that I talked with him he told me that he was sitting next to a table with a gun on it. He had no clarity about why he should go on, and I had very few answers for him. Experience after experience had abashed that little bird. His hope had perished.

I sat on the phone with him for about an hour. I remember lots of silence, lots of disappointment, lots of physical and emotional pain. For most of the call I didn't do anything but listen. Toward the end, he told me that he couldn't talk anymore. He didn't have anything left, and it was time to go. I was certain that he was going to hang up the phone and end his life. I felt this man's pain. I wished that I could do more. I was terribly sad this was the end for him.

I remember very clearly my last words to him that day. I said, "I am really worried about you, Matt. But I know that when I hear from you tomorrow, we will talk more. I will hear from you tomorrow." I hung up the phone with him not knowing if what I said was true.

Experience teaches us not to have hope. Experience tells us that whatever is to come next will be the same or worse than what came before. As Mark's Gospel tells us: Behold, there was a farmer that went out to sow. Some of his seed fell to the wayside, some on rocky ground, and some among the thorns. None of these seeds produced the grain the farmer had hoped for. This parable is about experience, about how our attempt to sow the seeds of change in our lives or in the world is continually undermined. It

takes hope to sow the seeds one more time. It takes experience to remind us that we shouldn't bother.

As many of you know, I arrived back from New Orleans about three weeks ago. I traveled to the Gulf Coast with twenty-seven of our youth. It obviously took a lot of hope, and possibly some foolishness, just to make it down there with our entire youth group.

Our work was varied. We helped someone plant a garden and do chores around their yard. We gutted a house. We did construction work on a church. We planted trees in a wetland. We went into the Lower Ninth, one of the places where the Hurricane hit the hardest, and helped to clean that area. We also worked with the Recreation Department on some New Orleans parks.

Looking at this laundry list, it sounds like the good that we did was obvious. It sounds like we knew what we were doing and why we were down there. Sometimes. Sometimes we did. As the youth know, it was a bit more complicated than that.

On the second day, I had a conversation with some of the adults and youth who were doing work in the Lower Ninth. They had worked for eight hours that day on moving a mound of dirt from one part of an empty lot to another part of that lot. The day before, another of our groups had worked in

that same area. They were put on another lot that had garbage strewn from one side to the other. Their task was to pick up that garbage. By the end of an eight-hour day, they had shown little progress on even one part of that lot. The youth were honest about this situation, that they were feeling quite frustrated.

I had the privilege of working with three of the ninth-grade girls. We did construction in the First Church of New Orleans for most of the week. For the first couple of days, we were given this large pile of beams. With hardhats, sledgehammers and crowbars, we were told to break those beams apart. Sarah, Nimita, and Andy had an impressive ability to pry those large beams into smaller boards.

At the end of the week, I sat in a reflection group with my team. I asked them how they felt about the work that they had done. One of the youth wisely said that it was hard for her to see the good that we were doing. So what if we broke a large pile of beams into smaller boards and then left? What good was that going to do?

I am sometimes asked if the youth felt like they had made a difference while we were down there. Sometimes. But sometimes their work was frustrating. Sometimes it didn't seem as though we were doing very much good. New Orleans was full of work that needed to be done. If we were

down there for an entire year, there would still be work for us to do. It was sometimes hard to have hope when it felt like our work had come to very little.

Hope isn't easy to have. It demands that when we are not sure about the outcome of our task that we keep going. When experience gives us failure, hope asks that we try again. When our seeds are sown on rocky ground, we sow some more. By the end of the week, our youth group had renovated a room for the youth of the New Orleans church. We put up almost an entire ceiling in that church. We had constructed a baseball diamond. We had planted two thousand trees in the wetlands. Hope wasn't always easy to have. But we didn't give up.

Cormac MacCarthy's book *The Road* is a story about a father and son who are living after the apocalypse. The world is blanketed in a mixture of white ash and snow, and they travel with a shopping cart across the country. They struggle to find food on a daily basis. The other human beings that they meet along the way are often aggressive and try to steal from them. The book is a terrifying vision of what the end of the world might look like. The father has to continually ask himself if he would have rather perished during the catastrophe that ended civilization as he knew it, or if being alive is better.

There is a theological lesson about hope in this book. The father decides that, yes, it is better to be alive than it is to be dead. Because of his son. His son comes to embody the hope that has been sucked out of the world. The book asks the question: What can we be hopeful about when life is stripped to its barest essentials? At a time when much of what the father and son encounter is harsh and cruel, to one another, they possess a reason for living and going on. They are, writes MacCarthy, “unto each other’s world entire.”

Matt called the Samaritans back the day after I spoke with him. And then he called the day after that. He started to speak with me and other volunteers regularly. Three months later, when I was about to leave the suicide hotline, he was still calling. His health and his future were not certain. But he had not taken his life. In one of our last conversations, he told me that he remembered my words from our first talk. He remembered that I told him, when he was about to hang up the phone and end his life, that I was sure that I would hear from him tomorrow. I had hope for Matt’s future even when he couldn’t. He knew that if he lived another day, someone would be there to talk with him. Even if no one else would.

This last dimension of hope—that we sometimes have to be hope for one another—is one of the hardest and most demanding. It requires that we

be present to persons and situations that are without hope. Emily Dickinson writes that hope “never asked a crumb” of her. I’ll admit that this has not been my experience. I think hope asks a lot from us. It encourages us to see possibility and change in the midst of failure and loss. It tells us to do the little bit of good that we can, even when that is frustrating and disheartening. Sometimes we even have to be the hope that someone else has lost.

Hope is an invitation, beyond and deeper than our experiences, that we say, “yes,” to the possibility of change in our lives and our world. It doesn’t give us the words that inform us what that change will look like, only the tune that tells us to keep on, to try again, to reach out. Even when that is almost too hard to do.