

“The Reason to Rejoice - Hope”

Romans 12:12a

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I know some of you may be thinking; “last week we looked at the games we play, and this week we have dolls!” What’s Covenant coming to! Not to worry....these gorgeous dolls from all around the world [as Donna shared with the children] are to help us in celebrating World Communion Sunday. By evidence of all the dolls, Covenant is a well traveled congregation! Just for fun, how many of you have been to Europe? Asia? Africa? The Middle East? Central America? Australia? Antarctica? South America? How many of you are planning a trip there in 2016? We have dolls up here from most of those places and many others. These beautiful dolls, in their local outfits represent for us in a tangible way the diversity of cultures around the world. World Communion Sunday was started by the Presbyterian Church in 1936 and now seventy-three years later has 165 partner communions and other organizations worldwide; Christians from every culture, who just like us, will be celebrating communion today.

It’s exciting to share in this kind of celebration! Celebrating our unity while respecting our diversity; witnessing to the world a message of hope! And it just so happens that “Hope” is the topic today in our fall sermon series ~ “Grace Happens!” For the last few weeks, we have been wrestling with grace, what it is, what it isn’t and how it happens in our lives. We’ve been grappling with some theological terms, like justification and sanctification, so today; our topic of hope may seem easier for some...and for others not so much!

What is hope? A simple dictionary definition is “to expect with confidence.” But in reality, there is nothing simple about hope! Parents may hope for a better life for their children than they have had. In the political scene last fall we saw the message of hope buoy up some citizens of our country. For some, hope is the cloud’s silver lining, an optimism that unfortunately is often superficial. The parable of the mustard, most often, is appropriately used in the interpretation of faith has a direct connection to hope if we consider Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen.” What do we hope for? For many people, hope springs forth in the latter years as the autumn of life brings on changes and the reality of death and the hope for eternal life. This last aspect of hope touches on what hope is for us as Christians...but we must remember that hope is more than just about our eternal life...hope is about our entire life! Christian hope thrives in our personal lives through our journeys of healing and wholeness. Christian hope survives in our common life in worldwide community as we work together for justice and peace. Like the meal we share around the table, hope is not something we possess, hope is something we share!

Let me share with you a powerful story of hope and as it is often the case when one talks about hope, a story of struggle and suffering. This story is about Emilie Nguidjol Songolo’s mother who is also named Emilie. The older Emilie was born Cameroon, Africa in 1933. She did not know her mother because her mother died when she was just two weeks old. After her mother’s death, she was placed in the care of a woman who abandoned her in the middle of a railroad because that woman did not find her beautiful enough. Her father raised her alone for twelve years and then remarried. At 12, Emilie was excited to have finally have a step-mother, however, her hopes were dashed as this woman too rejected her and sent her away from home to school.

From this difficult beginning was laid a foundation of faith, as she grew up, married, had seven children of her own, and throughout her life, her faith in God, and the church community always gave her strength to carry on. Covenant is a part of that worldwide church community for the Emilie. Emilie visited here in 1994 and 2003. She is on our prayer list and although she can't read English she finds her name on the bulletins that her daughter Emilie sends to her regularly.

In 2005, as a thank you for our prayers, for our being a witness of hope in her life, Emilie made these beautiful blue and white paraments. When I asked her why she said, [and you can read this in the October Caravan], "in my culture, things that are woven, like fabric carry a deep significance. They symbolize a deep, tight and dependable relationship, exactly like our relationship with God. A piece of fabric is what I was wrapped in when I was abandoned. When I was sent away to school, my belongings were wrapped in fabric. Each time I had to run away and hide with my children when my husband was pursued because of his political activity, we would leave everything we owned, but wrap ourselves and a few belongings in fabric. When we came back to our home, the dwelling would be destroyed but we always had our fabric. We would rebuild and good things never stopped happening in our lives. I find a comforting effect in blue and white. The symbols in the blue part of the paraments come from the Abbia symbol system of Cameroon. I always think God is in my life through fabric. I love fabric and just wanted to share this love with you. To God the Glory!"

All through October, we will have these paraments here to remind us of hope. To remind us of one woman's story that witnesses to hope through healing and wholeness; one woman's story that witnesses to survival. One woman's story from around the globe that has threads of struggle and suffering as themes woven into the fabric of hope: that as Emilie said, "good things never stop happening." One woman's story that reminds us "grace happens," in our lives and throughout our entire lives. One woman's story that we rejoice in, as a paradigm for all our stories, of grace and hope.

"Rejoice in hope," Paul tells us. Living in hope is hard...for hope is intricately connected to suffering which is the next phrase of verse 12, "be patient in suffering," that will be our sermon focus for next week, but this week in preparation for that we're weaving into our lives a deeper understanding of hope. Dr. Migliore of Princeton Seminary has a definition that I believe hits the nail on the head, "hope is the eager transformation of all things by God." We dare to hope because we believe in the power of the resurrection to transform lives, like Emilie's, like yours and like mine! We believe in the power of the resurrection to transform the world and usher in a new way of being a global community, the way of peace and justice!

It's no coincidence that we give to the Peacemaking Offering today. Remember Christian hope survives in our common life in worldwide community as we work together for justice and peace. Our offering will combine with others to work in many places including some of those represented by these dolls. Places where human needs are not being met and human rights are not being honored. Places where violence permeates every aspect of life while people wait, work and pray for peace!

Like the parable of the mustard seed, our gathering around this table in communion with others from all around the world and all of our gifts, through the Peacemaking offering and others, may

seem like small things, but together they and we, share hope with others. Hope that will grow! Hope that will make a difference one story at a time ~ one life, one village, one country, one world being transformed by God's love! We don't know what that will look like...but in hope we rejoice in its coming!

Amen