

Sermon: 5-24-20 Hope: in the Gospels

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Based on a sermon by Adam Hamilton

**Welcome.** My name is Kim Fields and I am one of the pastors at Central Church. I just want to share how delighted we are to have you here with us this week. Whether you are a long time member or meeting with us for the first time, you are welcome. If you have questions, prayer requests or simply want to check in, **I can be reached by email at [kimf@cupchurch.org](mailto:kimf@cupchurch.org)**. It is my prayer that God will bless you with hope this day and that you in turn will share that hope with others.

I know that we have been blessed at our house. This past week, we received cards from several members of the congregation who sent them to us as a way of encouraging us and spreading joy. And I know that Lorraine and I are not the only ones you are encouraging. I want to thank all of you who are taking your calling to embody God's love and hope seriously by spreading that love to others. Indeed, it might do us all good to take a minute and ask ourselves, "What am I doing to embody God's hope? How am I sharing joy?"

That, of course, is what we will be talking about today. Today, we are going to continue our sermon series on hope. Asking where do we find hope in the Scriptures? And how do we then share that hope with others? We started two weeks ago in the Psalms, asking where do we find hope in the Psalms? Then we moved to the Prophets, asking where do we find hope in the Prophets? Following that pattern, we are going to turn to the Gospels today, once again asking, where can we find hope?

But perhaps I should begin by reminding you of what I mean by hope. Hope, at least as I am using the term, is both a noun and a verb. So let me give you the definition of hope as a verb. Hope is **choosing to believe and act as if the future will be better than the present.** But it is more than that. It also includes spreading our hope. You see, once we have hope, sharing it isn't really all that hard, because hope is contagious. If we have hope, we can't help but share that hope with those around us.

If that is what hope is, then the opposite of hope would be despair. Despair can also be a verb. If we use despair as a verb, its definition might be **choosing to believe and act as if the future will be as bad as, if not worse than, the present.**

Notice, that in both cases, the definition includes the word choosing. We often think of hope and despair as feelings, and they are. But, they are feelings that arise from the thoughts that go through our minds. We each have the opportunity to tell ourselves that the future is going to be better than the present or that it will be worse. If we convince ourselves, or allow others to convince us, that things will be worse, we will soon turn to despair. However, if we convince ourselves that it will be better, then we soon find hope.

But back to the scriptures. After all, a sermon should be grounded in the Bible. I know that when I was working on this series, and pondering sections of the Bible in which to look for hope, I thought that finding hope in the Gospels would be the easiest. After all, Jesus is all about hope. There should be tons of occurrences of the word hope in the Gospels, right? So, tell me, or better yet, turn to someone

who is watching with you and tell them, how many times do you think the word hope occurs in the Gospels?

If you said, “one” then you are right. Of course, that is only true of the New International Version. If you search for the word hope in the New Revised Standard Version, you will double the number of times “hope” occurs. That’s right, the NRSV mentions hope twice. Just two times in all four of the Gospels! And even then the verses are not ones that offer much hope. They just mention the word hope.

How is that even possible? After all, hope is at the foundation of our Christian faith. Paul once described Christianity with three words: hope, faith and love. So, how could it be that Jesus only mentioned hope one time? Could it be that the reason Jesus did not talk much about hope is because he embodied it instead? Rather than just tell us about hope he lived it out. He gave hope to people by what he did. Which is why, rather than do a search for the word hope, we will be pondering how Jesus embodied hope in ways that passed it along to others.

If you read the Gospels, you will soon notice that Jesus spent most of his time with people in despair. These were people who had lost their way, who saw no way forward, who had largely given up on hope. Jesus spent his time with those who were in despair helping them to find a way forward. And, if you think about it, isn’t that what hope is?

Again, ask yourself, who did Jesus hang out with? He hung out with sinners, people who had brought despair into their own lives. If you asked them, they

probably would have admitted that they had messed up. They had baked their cakes and were now eating them. That is how life works.

It doesn't happen all at once. It happens a bit at a time. We lose touch with what matters most. Our values shift. And when they shift far enough, our families, our work, and our faith become out of kilter. Our lives become disordered.

So what does a life that is in order look like? What should our values be? Jesus was pretty clear about that. He said it really boils down to just two things: First, we are to **love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength**. And the second is much like the first. It is to **love our neighbor as we love ourselves**. Jesus was teaching what a godly, ordered life looks like. But, sometimes we lose our orientation and stray from living the lives we know we should.

Let me illustrate what that means. Again and again, Jesus tells us that we are to establish our lives on the firm foundation of God. (illustrate using blocks) That is the bedrock on which everything else we do and are is based. Next, comes loving and caring for our neighbors. This is key, but note it does not come first. Our love for neighbor is built on our love of God. Third, we are to love ourselves. This too is key. Sometimes, we talk as if self-love was a sin. It isn't, but note that this love for ourselves is built on our love for God and others. When we build our lives this way it works. When our hopes and dreams for ourselves are shaped by our love of God and our hopes and dreams for others, we are living as the people God created us to be, and everything else falls into place.

Sadly, though, that is not how we always live. Sometimes, we get our priorities out of order. We begin to think it is all about us. It is about our hopes and our

dreams and what we want from life. Which, of course, means that everyone else has to fit into our hopes and plans. Oh, we may love our family. We may even care about our neighbors, but it only goes so far. If our first priority is our hopes and our desires, then others are only lovable in so far as they aid, or at least don't get in the way of, our plans. We may still have faith in God. But God is not primary, God only works in so far as God fits into our plans and dreams. The order is first me, then others, and then God.

The problem is that a life structured in that way is not sustainable. It doesn't work. It is out of balance. It is an inverted pyramid that is doomed to topple. One of the most stable structures in the world is a **pyramid with its solid base**. But **invert a pyramid, try to get it to stand on its point and it will not remain upright for long**. Oh, you may get it to stand upright for a moment, but a life that places our personal hopes and dreams over those of God and others is doomed to tumble.

Jesus went to the folks whose lives had tumbled and fallen. These were the people who had focused their lives around themselves instead of God and others. The Gospels tell us that Jesus spent most of his time with sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors. These were folks who had blown it, who had turned away from God, and may have even begun to wonder if God had any use or place for them.

What did Jesus say to them? In Matthew 4:17 Jesus began his ministry preaching: **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."** We hear the word repent and we think of an angry preacher, pounding the pulpit, telling folks to get their acts together or else. But that is not what Jesus is saying. The word we translate repent is "Metanoia". It means to change our minds. Jesus is telling us to change what we are thinking, because when we change what we think, we change the way

we act. In time, our hearts change, too. Ultimately, we will find our lives reordered such that God is first, others are second, and we are living the lives God created us to live. Lives that are in balance.

So Jesus went to people whose lives were out of balance, whose lives were not working, who had given up and were living in despair, who doubted if God would even accept them after what they had done, and he talked about forgiveness. Sixty times Jesus talked about forgiveness. He didn't condemn people. He came offering grace. He said, "Of course God still loves you. God knows every awful thing you have ever done and he still wants you. Come home. Come home with me." That is why he told stories about prodigal children, who were broken almost beyond repair, and yet were welcomed home with parties, and made right again.

He reached out to people like Matthew. Listen to Matthew's story as recorded by Matthew himself: **9 As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. 10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. — Mtt. 9:9-10**

Do you know what the name Matthew means? It means "gift from God". When Matthew was born, his parents saw him as a gift from God. But, over time Matthew drifted away from God and God's people. He became a tax collector. He sold out to the occupying Romans in exchange for their money. His life became all about him and what he wanted. There was little concern for God. Little concern for others.

Which is why, when Jesus asked Matthew to follow, people could not believe it. What was Jesus, a Rabbi and a holy man, doing choosing a tax collector? Jesus was wasting his time. He was risking his reputation. But listen to how Matthew reacted? Surprising everyone, Matthew walked away from his tax table. He left everything and followed Jesus.

Not only did he follow Jesus, he invited his friends to come and see, too. Later that day, when Jesus went to Matthew's house for dinner, Matthew invited his friends, a bunch of sinners and tax collectors, to join them. When the Pharisees saw that Jesus was breaking bread with sinners, they questioned Jesus' disciples, asking them what Jesus thought he was doing. Eating with sinners was not OK. Did he condone their sins?

Do you remember how Jesus answered them? He said that healthy people don't need a doctor. Sick people do. Jesus didn't come to call righteous people. He came for sinners. If you think about it, isn't that what our mission and vision statements say. Do you remember what they say? They remind us that **we are called** to make disciples by loving people exactly as they are in very practical ways and lead them to Christ. We are to love and welcome everyone, even sinners. Which is a good thing, because last time I checked pretty much all of us were sinners.

Why is that our mission? It is our mission because that is what Jesus did. We are to welcome sinners and invite them to follow Jesus. Our message is that it doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter what you have done in the past. Jesus wants you. Yes, Jesus wants you.

Which brings us to our scripture verse for today. It is Matthew 11:28, where Jesus said, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”** That was Jesus’ message to Matthew and all those who were in despair, who had lost hope, who weren’t sure that God even wanted them anymore. He said, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”** God loves you. God wants you. You are exactly who God is seeking.

Of course, he wasn’t just saying that to the tax collectors. That is Jesus message to all sinners. Oh, some of us act as if it doesn’t apply to us. We get pretty good at covering up our failings and doubts, but deep down, in our heart of hearts, we know that we are sinners, too. We wonder if God could really love or want us. And Jesus comes to us and says, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”**

He says to us, **“If you let me help, I can reorder your life. I can help you get your priorities straight.”** You see God is the god of second chances and Jesus comes again and again calling us to follow. The challenge is that following Jesus is scary. Jesus asked Matthew to give up everything and follow. Why would we consider abandoning what little we have to follow Jesus?

What does Jesus say to that? He says, **“Trust me. Trust that God will provide for you. After all, God loves you, he wants you to have good things. Trust me.”**

Again, in Matthew he said, **“25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?... 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” — Mtt. 6:25,27**



So, how can we take our minds off our worries? Jesus says that we should focus on our priorities. We should focus on loving God by spending time with God and growing deeper. We should love our neighbors by, as Matthew 25 reminds us, meeting their practical needs. In other words, we are to live as the hands and feet of Jesus reaching out to those who are struggling. When we do this, we are offering hope to those who are without hope. Paradoxically, when we offer hope to others, we discover that hope is both contagious and reciprocal. As we give the gift of hope to others, we in turn receive hope back from them.

When we risk trusting God, and reaching out to others, God takes care of our anxiety. A few weeks back, I spoke with the new director of the Adult Teen Challenge. He had just accepted the position and he told me that he was worried. They were short on food. They needed toiletries. Even worse, he no idea how they would get those things. What could he do? He prayed and then Jesus showed up. Jesus showed up in the form of folks like us. We sent them a monetary gift for food and delivered toiletries. And we were just one of the ways in which Jesus showed up. The director shared, that as gifts of food and money appeared, he went from feeling a sense of hopelessness and despair to growing in his trust of Jesus and feeling more and more hopeful. We helped him to find hope.

We helped to remind him that the words of Jesus are still true. You don't need to worry about what you will eat or drink or wear, because there are others in the body of Christ who are willing to embody God's love and hope and provide those things. Because there are those who have the blocks of their lives, their priorities straight, and live lives of loving God and neighbor, who hear Jesus say they need help and so they help. It is a matter of putting flesh on Jesus.

That is what we are doing right now for over 100 Lunch Buddy families. But again, it is not just those we help who receive hope. I was talking with Julie McDonald who is spear heading our Lunch Buddy ministry and she spoke of the hope she was receiving from the families and those she was working with. Why? Because it is in sharing hope that we receive hope.

It is in sharing hope that we embody Jesus. Recall, at the end of his ministry, Jesus said, "These things that I have done, you are going to continue to do." We are to love those who feel unlovable. We are to meet the needs of the needy. We are to heal the hurting. We are to embody hope for the hopeless. And when we do, we receive hope back ourselves.

It is like our memory verse states. In Matthew 11:28, Jesus said, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**" We can both bring our burdens to Jesus and help carry the burdens of others. And when we do, not only do they receive rest, we receive rest, in return. Again, it is a matter of trust. When we trust, in hope, that Jesus will make the future better, Jesus comes to us giving us hope, hope that we in turn can share with others. So, go out this week, embody hope for others, and see if you do not receive hope back in return.