

A Future with Hope
Bishop Janice Riggle Huie
General Conference 2008
April 23, 2008

Romans 8:18-30

Dear friends, Grace and peace to you in the name of our Living Hope, our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Welcome to the 2008 General Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Look around,

What an extraordinary gathering.

United Methodists from all over the world.

Over 50 nations. Five continents. Northern hemisphere. Southern hemisphere.

Rich. Poor. In-between. A rainbow of colors. Women and men. Clergy and lay. Representing 48,000 congregations, 129 annual conferences, and 11.4 million members around the world.

We who are many are one people: the people of The United Methodist Church.

We are a people who rejoice in God's grace.

We are a people transformed by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are a people confident that the Holy Spirit blesses us with a future with hope.

We are a people trying to live by three simple rules given us by John Wesley: "Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God."

We gather to re-commit ourselves to the mission Jesus gave us: "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world to the glory of God.

If the Apostle Paul were asked to preach tonight, there is no doubt in my mind he would preach from his letter to the church at Rome. It is a letter written with the maturity of one seasoned by hardship and steeped in God's grace. It is the only letter he wrote to a church he neither personally founded nor visited. Paul addresses his listeners tenderly, and speaks tenderly to us tonight.

“To all God’s beloved in Rome who are called to be saints.” He boldly asserts: “I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation.”

To theological questions about belief, Paul offers doctrine.

To practical questions about Christian living, Paul offers down-to-earth instructions for how Christians should live in community.

Paul catalogues special interests groups at work in the early church: The “weak” that depend on the law and the “strong” that depend on the spirit. Jewish Christians who thought you had to be circumcised and Gentile Christians who weren’t about to be.

And what about tonight? What would the Apostle Paul say to our special interest groups?

I’m tempted to name them, but I won’t. I wonder sadly if we have learned too much from our government about interest groups and how they work--at least here in the United States. I can’t help but wonder if some believe they have cornered the market of righteousness.

If so, Paul has an answer: “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Then he offers up God’s justifying righteousness in Jesus Christ.

Let’s look at Paul’s world and our world today.

In his day, Jewish believers were experiencing harassment and deportation at the hands of the Roman government. Gentiles lived as part of the underclass of Roman society.

In our day, a million people a year -- mostly children are dying of malaria. Thousands are orphaned by HIV/AIDS. More than three billion people live on less than two dollars a day, while governments spend obscene amounts on budgets of death and destruction.

Violence prowls the land; whatever country is your home. Our planet is warming more quickly than it appeared just a decade ago -- toward an end that we can’t yet imagine.

In Europe and the United States, many people in our beloved United Methodist Church are anxious. That anxiety is often expressed in the language of fear. Some fear the church is slowly dying or worse, becoming irrelevant. Others fear a sinking economy and that the church will run out of money.

Worries about division still threaten. Some fear the church won’t grapple with the big social issues of our day, while others fear the church will. Central Conference delegates wonder if U. S. delegates will really listen to what they have to say. Among a thousand delegates, it seems there are a thousand points of view.

It is complicated. It can be confusing. It is easy to get discouraged, to feel vulnerable, helpless, and even lose hope.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul writes to such a people: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time aren’t worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.”

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved.”

First century Christians were known by how much they loved one another. Today I believe that 21st century Christians will be known by the power of their hope that God will indeed redeem the world.

Hope is the nerve center of the Christian life. Love is the heart. Faith is the muscle. It is impossible to live without hope.

Show me someone without hope Christian, Jew, Muslim, atheist -- you name it -- and I will show you someone who is either dead or so desperate that they are capable of the most awful violence.

The Bible is a story of hope.

Genesis tells us about the dove flying back to the ark with a sprig of hope in her beak. Abraham and Sarah met hope disguised as three strangers. Isaiah caught a glimpse of hope as a lion and a lamb lying down together, as water flowing in the desert, as a valley lifted up, as a shoot coming forth from a long-forgotten stump. Jeremiah tells beaten down refugees to pick themselves up, build houses, plant gardens, and birth children. God has plans for them: a future with hope.

Jesus preached the good news of a realm where hope reigns supreme: a kingdom of peace, a kingdom of justice, and a kingdom of mercy. A world where people forgive one another 70 times seven. A world where the blind see and the sick are cured. A world where leaders wash their followers’ dirty feet.

Jesus taught his disciples a prayer of hope. We say it every day. We will say it tonight. “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

In writing this letter, the Apostle Paul paints hope on a cosmic canvas of salvation history.

The focal point of the painting is the Risen Christ.

Resurrection hope transforms lives. Resurrection lives transform the world.

It is too bad, at least in the English language, the word “hope” has gotten out of shape lately. Hope is a little flabby, like muscles without enough exercise. You have probably overheard conversations like this:

“May I count on you to serve supper at the homeless shelter next Thursday?” “I hope so.”

“Pastor, we’re going to start a new church in your area.” Will your congregation help? I hope we can.

“We have a vision of creating a thousand Volunteers In Mission teams of young adults to work in 30 countries next summer to reduce poverty. It will take people, places, training and dollars. Will you join us?” “That’s a really big dream. I hope to help. Talk to me again later.”

Do you hear what is happening?

Hope has become a marshmallow word. It sounds soft. It looks sweet and appealing. Get it close to the fire, and hope melts off the stick and drips on the ground.

John Wesley would say that marshmallow hope is the hope of “almost Christians.”

In my travels to hundreds of churches in Arkansas and Texas I often ask, “Tell me about your mission.” I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve heard this response, “Mission? We just hope we can survive another year, and we don’t know how we’re going to do that.”

Paul says, “Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. In this hope we are saved.”

When the Apostle Paul uses the word hope five times in this reading, he is not describing a sweet, sappy kind of hope that evaporates in the noonday sun. He is not describing good intentions or wishful thinking. He is describing the sure confidence of a future reality.

The kind of hope that Paul is describing is like a woman giving birth to a child. There is struggle. There is pain. There is brokenness. But the baby is going to be born. New birth will happen. There is absolutely no doubt about it.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Yes, disciples wait. Of course. But their waiting is not static or passive. Rather, disciples wait with eager longing and unfettered imaginations to discover where God is already at work in the world and join with God in that transformation.

Eugene Peterson says it this way:

“This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It’s adventurous, expectant, greeting God with a child-like ‘What’s next, Papa?’”

“The moment we get tired waiting, God’s Spirit is right alongside us, helping us along. That’s why we can be so sure that every detail of our lives of love for God is worked into something good.”

Elizabeth McKee Gore is a dynamic, young United Methodist laywoman who works at the United Nations Foundation as the head of global alliances. She has been working with us on the Nothing But Nets and has visited many our central conferences in Africa. On the way home from Angola last year from a visit to hospitals and churches with Bishop Domingos, she wrote this story:

“The symbol of hope for me today is a pink mosquito net. On Monday, I met Esperanca Afonco at the Pediatric Hospital in Luanda. Esperanca is 8 years old, and she suffers from both AIDS and malaria. Her mother, Bela, had decorated her hospital bed to look like a bed for a Disney World princess. She draped a pink insecticide treated net over the bed, her dolls and the child.

"Esperanca was wearing a beautiful pink satin dress that swallowed her frail body. The child’s room was a stark contrast from nearby wards where two to three children shared a bed, misery and disease.

"Her mom explained, 'Her immune system is too weak for her to contract malaria again. She has to sleep under a net.'

"The doctor whispered, 'She probably has only a few weeks to live.'

"Why have you worked so hard to create such a lovely environment?' asked Elizabeth.

"The mom responded, 'We have to have hope.'"

Resurrection hope gives us the courage to stand beside the bed of a loved one with a terminal disease.

Resurrection hope lifts us up when we look down at an open grave of one who died all too young.

Resurrection hope gives us the perseverance and courage to overcome the insults of institutional racism.

Resurrection hope plants new seed when the rains finally come.

Resurrection hope rebuilds homes and lives after a storm.

Resurrection hope re-builds a war-torn nation.

Resurrection hope transforms lives and changes futures.

Tonight, through us, all the people of The United Methodist Church gather around this table filled with resurrection hope. We are no longer captives to fear. We are heirs of a new covenant--a new future. By the grace of God, we are one with Christ, one with each other and one in ministry to all the world until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

And please do not forget Esperanca this week.

In Portuguese, Esparanca means hope.

Amen.