

HOW SHALL WE HOPE?

ROMANS 8:22-27

UTE MOLITOR, FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, CAMDEN, UCC; PENTECOST, MAY 19, 2024

Romans 8:22-27:

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, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now 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. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with signs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Whenever my mother referred to her own experience of pregnancy or that of another woman, she would use the old poetic German expression: “in Hoffnung sein” which means “to be in hope.” Isn’t that a beautiful expression, “to be in hope” when we are pregnant with life, whether an actual human life or an inspiration or desire to create change and well-being? This way of speaking embodies so much longing, anticipation, dreams, joy, and a sense of potential.

My stepdaughter, Emma, is now two weeks from the due date of their first baby. They are preparing for this birth, how to care for the baby and for the recovery of Emma’s body with utmost care. These are such exciting times and there is so much that is unknown and tender. I ask myself, who will this child become and what hope will this child embody? What community, what kind of world will this child inhabit and hope to help create? What is the basis and scope of our hope? Can we extend our hope beyond the children we know to the children of this world from Kiev to Moscow, from Rafah to Tel Aviv, and even across species in this amazing creation?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains to give birth, to undergo a transformation, to usher in new life. Likewise, for Paul, the early Christians were longing for a deepening and completion of their own transformation. Christians in Rome were facing persecution and questions of identity, belonging, and hope for the future.

To them Paul says, “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes in what is seen?” What might he have meant?

I believe Paul wanted to encourage and remind them that hope is not about guarantees. Hope always implies risking a deeper trust in the very source of hopefulness which is God. It embodies the paradox of letting go and actively opting into the flow of God’s spirit moving through, come what may. This power and presence of the Holy Spirit among us is what we celebrate on Pentecost. On Pentecost, Jesus’ friends and followers were filled with the Spirit. They were empowered to share good news of God’s abiding love and power to change the world even despite evidence to the contrary. They were freed from their fear and confusion and emboldened to trust and act in making a new community.

Paul tried to assure his people who were facing their own fears that the Holy Spirit was already interceding for them “with sighs too deep for words.” The Spirit is strong, persistent, undaunted, and resilient. The Holy Spirit will not leave us bereft either, especially when we are feeling weak or don’t know how to pray and articulate our longing, joy, or pain. We are not alone. I am struck by Paul’s assertion that God “searches the heart” all the while the Spirit is at work in us and interceding for us. What might it mean “to search the heart?” Could it be that God is primarily interested in our intention, our motivation, our heart’s desire to hope, to open and connect, to love and wish the same for others? Might these qualities and willingness to invest ourselves matter even more than the particular outcome of what we try to do?

In his own context, Paul and his contemporaries were awaiting the return or “second coming” of Christ and the ultimate transformation of all of life in God. Contemporary theologians like Richard Rohr suggest that this “second coming” is manifested now whenever people “are in hope” together as the living body of Christ and collaborate to manifest God’s love, justice, and power to change the world.¹

¹ It becomes possible when our hearts do not search for individual salvation but know that their own well-being depends on the collective healing of the whole body of Christ, which is the community of life.

I would like to share a story about how such collective “being in hope” is taking place in Little Rock, Arkansas.² At the heart of the story is Arlo Washington who grew up in Little Rock as the son of a single mom. She was “in hope” with him when she was 16. At first, they lived in his grandmother’s house who cared for numerous children and grandchildren. Arlo’s mom earned her GED and found a job. She worked tirelessly to help neighbors. She kept reminding people that life’s circumstances can bring hardship. She would say that people had to offer each other compassion. She would say that people needed a chance to hope for restoration if things had gone awry, that people needed love. Sadly, Arlo’s mom died just before he graduated from high school. He was left with two younger sisters who needed his help as well.

He moved beyond his initial panic and connected with his own hope which survived his loss because of the depths of love he shared with his mom. Arlo decided to become a barber. Traditionally, barbers have not only cut hair but also provided listening ears, counseling, sometimes a priestly presence. In olden days, a barber might have even been the one to pull teeth when no doctor was around. Barbers knew who in the community was hurting and when the community at large was hurting. This completely fit Arlo’s gifts and the desires of his heart. Arlo was “in hope” for his family and his community.

One day, one of his customers came in and told Arlo that he had just lost his job and was afraid he could not provide for his children. He asked Arlo if he could borrow \$150 and said he would pay him back in thirty days. Arlo gave him the money. Sure enough, the man came back and repaid the loan. A few months later, the same man asked for a slightly larger loan to try to affect a bigger change in his life. Arlo took a risk with him again and the man repaid.

All that got Arlo thinking about how much a small loan could have a positive impact in his community which only had loan sharks and payday lenders who asked for exorbitant interest. In this black part of Little Rock with 30,000 people, there was not a single bank. Across the Interstate, in the white affluent neighborhood of 8000 people, there were fourteen banks.

² [The Barber of Little Rock | KarmaTube](#)

These were all signs of the systemic injustice and redlining in which the residents of whole neighborhoods are deprived of services such as banking and insurance, access to grocery stores and health care based on race. And even when people got access to a bank, they were usually just offered more credit cards but no fair line of credit or a substantial loan to start a business or buy a home. People refer to this as “Banking while Black.” Arlo knew that such inequities were among the many reasons why the wealth gap was only getting bigger and black families continued to be undermined in creating a legacy of generational wealth. On average, the wealth of black families continues to be seven times lower than that of white families.

Arlo felt inspired by his mother’s legacy of working for the good of her community. Surely, when God searched her heart, God found a heart of love, compassion, hope and commitment. We can say that she shared this kind of generational wealth with her son, and he found a way to create practical change for many. Arlo took several daring steps. He found allies to start the *People Trust Community Loan Fund (PTCLF)*. Applicants for loans or grants are interviewed and given room to tell their stories. The loan fund may help with rent and security deposits much like our Shields Fund does (though all grants based). The *PTCLF* works with people to determine the best and reasonable schedule for repayment based on a person’s circumstance regardless of race. The work is coordinated, concrete and targeted toward what people most need to take the next steps. Ninety-five percent of the loans have been repaid on time. [I remembered after completing the sermon, that we have the Genesis Loan Fund here in Maine which focuses on community development though, it seems with a focus on organizations more so than individuals.]

An auto mechanic who lost the job he held for twenty-five years when the owner sold the business got a loan from PTCLF to start his own repair shop. He called it “Incredible Autocare.” I wonder if he chose that name because it was so hard to believe that he could someday run his own business. He could not get a loan anywhere and needed someone to trust his ability and commitment. The *PTCLF* came through for him. The fund is also collaborating with a woman who was in prison for nearly eight years and learned how hard it was to get started when you

leave prison with empty pockets and nowhere to go. She gets the names of people who are about to be released and the loan fund contacts inmates even before they leave prison. They are offered a small grant to have something to build on. This outreach is also a reminder that they have not been forgotten or written off.

Arlo says that his goal is to create equity in his city. Everyone should have the same resources and opportunities. If you want to develop your community, he says, you need to give people a chance to develop. He started his own barber school and takes extra care to take on male and female students who have been incarcerated or lived through some other hardship. Students receive grants to study, train as barbers and get the business skills they need. They can get loans through the *People Trust* to start their own business when they are ready. People are not just fed fish, so to speak, but are taught how to fish and empowered to build on their skills and dreams.

Arlo also encourages people to develop and open their hearts. His mom's spirit is at work here as well and it directly reflects the Holy Spirit. She showed Arlo the need for compassion. In this spirit, Arlo sometimes asks his Barber School students to try an exercise. Imagine two grown men being asked to stand facing each other. Arlo then invites them to look each other in the eye for two minutes without looking away. Arlo will say to them, "Think about the kids he has. Think about the setbacks and the suffering he has endured, all the hard lessons, the hurt. Just be with him right now." This is a practice of mirroring. Individuals are seen and their experience treated with compassion and dignity. These encounters often engender tears and mutual compassion which builds love muscle and a desire to help each other, so that future generations might thrive. Arlo likes to say, "If you have money but can't create impact, what is the point?" As far as he is concerned, his work of creating a just and fair world is just beginning.

Arlo's story is an inspiring example of "being in hope" in our time. What are our stories? What stories do we want to write together? Arlo couldn't know ahead of time what fruits his hope would yield. I imagine there were setbacks at times and more may come in a world that is far

from being healed from the pain of inequity. The wise sages of all major religions remind us, and I imagine that Arlo's mom would agree, that a pure heart gives itself to love first. And from this spirit of love, the heart "is in hope," serving what it knows to be true, courageous, trustworthy, and loving no matter what the outcome is in our own lifetime. All along, the Spirit is "interceding with sighs too deep for words," not only for us but generations to come. May the Holy Spirit guide us a community to find the best ways to create targeted, and sustainable impact to the glory of God.