

Tough Hope

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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 28, 2011

Text: Romans 12.9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Matthew 16.21-26

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?'

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

Hard to believe it is almost a week since Jack Layton died. We have heard so many stories this week, and so many memories shared. It has been a beautiful kaleidoscope of actions, and words. His own farewell letter touched so many hearts,

and I think people felt themselves somehow addressed and included in a way that we seldom experience. We share the sadness that collectively we have lost not only what we did have, but also what we didn't have, what was yet to come – painful to know that his life was on the brink of a grand new chapter which will now not be written. That sadness ripples along under all the memories of inspiration and encouragement.

I think of the image that Prime Minister Harper used of a jam session never quite attempted. Think of the political life we might have in our city and our province and our country if that were the operating model. Each contributing its special genius, working together and separately, improvising toward a shared goal.

Or remember the wonderful chalk at city hall. Washed away by the rain – so symbolic really – and then begun again. *Behold all flesh is as the grass and as the flower of grass, it withers.* But as we see after rain, the grass also sprouts, irrepressibly. In the midst of sorrow about his death, there has been a collective affirmation of joy in having witnessed a life well lived. Appreciation for everything Jack Layton offered, and hope that it may somehow continue.

It seems to be true that questions about life arise most poignantly when we think about death. It is when we stand in the shadow of death, to use the Biblical phrase, that we are most aware of the value of life. Brent Hawkes spoke yesterday about recognizing the sheer wonder of life itself. The gift of it. When death is near, the tender questions that underlie our everyday reality of family and friends and work and play are unearthed. How are you going to live? What are you going to make of this beautiful gift of life? Are you going to use it to 'gain the whole world', as Jesus asks in today's reading. Or is there something even richer, even deeper, that you are called to?

As we read Jack's great words about love, hope and optimism we can see how much like the disciple Peter he was. A person of endless positive energy, whose devotion to the cause never flags. A person whose buoyancy and inventiveness allows him to persevere no matter what the setbacks. A person who can take a rag tag bunch and turn it into a going concern – whether it is the NDP in Quebec, or in the case of Peter, the Christian church.

How often this week have we seen Jack Layton described as 'sunny'? We have seen photographs and video footage of what the Andrew Steele in the Globe called his 'fabulous smile'. And we can see in this reading that Peter has some of the same characteristics. A warm and enthusiastic disposition. He naturally looks on the bright side and is energized by the good news he has heard from Jesus. He has high hopes. When Jesus starts to tell his followers just how bad it is about to get, Peter will not have it. God forbid, he says, don't even talk that way. But Jesus insists.

I think there is something for us to learn here. Jesus really wasn't an optimist. You probably wouldn't call him 'sunny'. He looked the worst prospects right in the face. And although there is a place for optimism, this fierce realism of his also makes its contribution.

This week we have heard it a hundred times. “Love is better than anger, hope is better than fear, optimism is better than despair.” I can’t count the Facebook friends who have added those words to their photo banner. But the question remains, once the inspiring moment is past. When the sun rises on the day after, on Monday morning so to speak, how do you actually *do* that? It comes more readily to some, but everyone needs what we might call an implementation strategy. Where does hope come from? What is it that can take us beyond the words to committed, constructive action? What is it that will empower us to keep going in the face of overwhelming odds? Where *does* hope come from?

The Christian faith offers a surprising reversal in the logic of inspiration. It doesn’t say, hope will inspire commitment, it says hope will arise from commitment. It is not so much that our hope will make us committed, but that our commitment will make us hopeful. The way Jesus puts it is this: take up your cross. He doesn’t say, be hopeful, he says take up your cross. Put your life on the line and be prepared to lose it. We have all heard of tough love – what Jesus points to is tough hope.

In the same letter to the Romans that David read from, Paul develops this counterintuitive insight. He says in Chapter 5, [suffering or] struggle produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. There’s the description of Jack Layton right there. He didn’t snatch his hope out of the air. Hope doesn’t come from an inspiring slogan or a fond wish or a religious command, it arises from character. And character is forged by the exigencies of life.

Hope and love and even optimism are not simply gifts that some lucky people have – they have to be cultivated and nurtured. And that’s our job here, because the character that produces hope is formed in community. The vocation of the church is not simply to call for hope, but to help people to build it up, to make it operative.

The passage David read spells out in very practical ways the way a community can cultivate and nurture the kind of people the world needs. *Let love be genuine ...Paul wrotehate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Then more concretely, Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you ... Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil ...live peaceably with all.... never avenge yourselvesDo not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Building the kind of character that produces hope is a long term proposition. It includes many moments of grief, and many times when it seems that the sun will not shine again. How often it seems that wonderful work is cut short, unfinished.

But it is not ours to finish. The whole burden isn’t ours alone. We share it with each other, and we in turn are upheld and carried by the love of God. We are held and cherished and empowered by something much larger than our own convictions, larger than our love, larger than our hope or our optimism. The dream that lasts longer than a lifetime isn’t a dream. You can hear her breathing. And for this we thank God. Amen.