

April 3 2011 Homily: HOPE

A Few weeks ago, Reverend Mary discussed suffering and suggested that rather than trying to hide from it, eradicate it, deny it, that in some way we embrace it as part of the experience of living. I believe I got that all right. I listened closely for words about how to recover from suffering or survive it especially since I knew I would be talking about Hope today. Interestingly, unless I missed it, the word hope was never mentioned. Yippee! There was still hope that there was something left to say in our service.

During advent, each Sunday the 4 weeks before Christmas we light a candle, one for peace, one for joy, one for love and one for hope. When Pandora's box was opened, hopelessness was the only thing left, all the other evils were released into the world. Hope is a lovely name for a person. Hope is part of our every day speech: "Gee I hope so" or "I hope it doesn't snow" or "I hope the car starts"; a statement of optimism often said almost without thinking. Today, I am going to explore hope, it's connection to wishing, some different concepts of the idea of hope and how we practice and prepare for hope.

Immediately as I began to think of hope, the connection between wishing and hoping popped into my mind and reminded me of one of my favorite songs growing up in the 60s by Dusty Springfield, called Wishin' and Hopin' about teenage love. The opening words are "Wishing and hoping and thinking and praying ...Planning and dreaming each night of his charms."

So lets start with wishing. A wish is described as a desire for something, often supernatural or unbelievable, a request beyond reality, for

something that is probably more than is reasonable (the classic “I wish I could win the lottery”). It is often a request to a spirit, a supernatural being, like a genie or fairy, or unknowing being which sort of enhances the unreal aspect of wishes or wishing. It is often used in literature as a plot device in a morality story, the moral not infrequently being “be careful what you wish for, you may get it”. In summary a wish is often an unrealistic request for something beyond normal, to something or someone equally unreal resulting in something that may leave you worse off than before, suggesting you didn’t really deserve it, maybe because you didn’t earn it. So no more wishing.

The idea of hope actually has several meanings and contexts. I suggest that hope can be an emotion or a thought often in response to something that is going wrong or could go wrong (note both the present and the future reference). It is the thing you do when you want every thing to go right, like no rain on an outdoor wedding, or hoping that things go well when you send a child to kindergarten or a teenager to college (although that last one may fit more into the wishful thinking category).

It may be the thought or feeling that we use to help combat depression or anxiety, a sort of cognitive behavior therapy; just thinking good thoughts, making ourselves think positively or making ourselves stop thinking negatively may work to keep us moving and feeling better; the hope that tomorrow will be a better day. The technique that we use when we start to think something bad and say STOP and think something good instead. In psychology this would be the agency part of hope, involving the expectancy of positive outcomes.

The second part of Hope is the Action part; it is the pathway, or the ability to see how positive outcomes can be reached. The Wishin and Hopin song goes on to say that wishin and hoping won't get you into his arms, but you have to wear your hair for him, squeeze him and kiss him. A very practical girl, that Dusty Springfield, although I may not agree completely with her recommendations. This is an example of the pathway to carrying out hope. Other examples of positive activities abound. It is thought that the telling of legends and stories was sometimes used by ancient peoples to provide comfort during times of trouble. People in situations of imprisonment and under constant fear use creativity to help them through the bad, such as keeping journals, creating poetry, writing stories. We all have read or know people who have seemed to survive the impossible, drawing deep on reserves of faith or memory or songs or work or something that actively diverts the mind from despair. It was Ann Frank who said that despite everything she believed people were basically good. I used the picture of a sunflower taken by Dee Oberle on the table in front, which includes a quote by Helen Keller: "Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see the shadow." Sometimes we are encouraged to just do, even without the thought of hope. Dorothy Day founder of the catholic worker movement said: "No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless, there is too much to do." Dale Carnegie states "Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all." Finally, Anne Lamott describes hope this way: "Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up."

I believe we practice and prepare for when we need hope. We establish bonds with others, through family and community to help sustain us when needed, creating memories and stories. Participation in this church community functions as a source of strength which can be experienced even when one is not physically present in the congregation. We reach out to people whose needs are greater than our own. We plant seeds even in the dark of winter. We prepare sometimes by imagining when we may need hope by acknowledging that with good times comes the bad. One of my newly favorite examples recently came from reading the forward to the book *Liberal Arts through the Ages*, a textbook of pictures of 100 works of art that Augustana College uses in its Liberal Arts first year curriculum. The reason for this is the belief that exposure to the liberal arts is valuable for a number of reasons, one of which is to “prepare one to meet the opportunities and agonies (SAY AGAIN) that is: opportunities and agonies never seen before.” President Stephen Bahls, in his introduction says: “Just as our faith can sustain us through this life and the hereafter, the gift of art does not leave us or part from us. Art enhances the life of the mind in a way that neither hardship nor illness can tear away.”

Hope, then, can be described as a **state of mind** that conquers despair; it is how we think and feel when presented with challenges, some of which may seem unbearable. It helps us get out of bed each morning, and imagine a future. It is also the **things that we do** to actively to relieve the feelings of hopelessness: the reaching out to others; the physical activity of doing whatever needs to be done; the creative activity of singing, storytelling, writing; remembering the lessons from art and history and science; and

remembering those with whom we have a created a connection. Hope, in the end, is love; love all that is life.