

United Church in the Valley: May 19, 2019
Student Minister: Matthew Heesing
Making Space for the Sharing
Pt III: "...through Preparation"

Scripture Reading:

1 Peter 3:8-9; 15-16

(a combination of *The Message* and other translations)

“Finally, all of you—
work together,
be sympathetic to one another’s struggles;
love each other,
and live with compassion and humility.
Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult.
On the contrary, return every act of evil with good,
for you are a people blessed to be a blessing...”

And friends,
always be prepared
to speak about your faith to others:
always be ready to give a reason
for the hope that you have.

If anyone asks you
why you’re living the way that you are,
have an answer for them,
and offer it with the utmost respect and courtesy.”

Sermon on following page.

Sermon:

Over the last couple weeks,
we have been making Space for the Sharing—
the sharing of our faith with others.
And bit by bit,
we've been building up a foundation
for a positive and healthy approach to evangelization,
and we started by Making Space for the Sharing
through peace—
through the knowledge and the inner assurance
that we are enough,
that we have nothing to prove.

And last week, we continued by Making Space for the Sharing
through presence—
the way in which we approach others,
coming alongside them, not standing in front.

And today, the next step of our foundation is preparation—
from peace, to presence, to preparation,
for, as we heard in our reading from 1 Peter,
we are called to
“always be prepared to share the reason
for the hope that we have.”

But how many of us actually *do* feel prepared
to share the reason for the hope that we have, with others?
I imagine—not a lot.
But today, I'd like to take the opportunity
to guide us through a reflection
of our own faith journeys,
which will help us in this process of preparation.
And for this, you're going to need the piece of paper
that you received when you came in the door.
And a pen—does everyone have one?
Today is an interactive Sunday—we're all going to be engaged.
And to start, I'd like you to draw
two parallel winding lines like a river—
starting on the very left side of the page,
but leaving a little space on the right.

This river, or maybe you see it as a winding road,
represents your life thus far—
the very beginning, on the left,
and on the right side, the present day,
with room for what might still emerge tomorrow.

Over the next ten minutes or so,
I'm going to ask a series of questions,
and if it sparks an answer in you,
I'd like you to jot your thoughts down along this river
at the point in your life journey
where it would be most appropriate—
maybe near the beginning, the middle, or closer to today.
Don't think too hard—there won't be a lot of time between questions, but that will
help you to just write
whatever immediately comes to mind.
There's no wrong answers.
And you won't be asked to share any of this with others.
This is yours.

And maybe some of the following questions
won't feel like they apply to you, or maybe, to you, one question might sound exactly
the same as another—
but let's just be open and patient and willing to reflect
for what might resonate within us.
Are we ready?

I wonder....
what was your very first memory of church?

What was your very first experience of faith?

Who was someone that influenced your faith as a child?
Mark their name at a certain point in the river.
Who was someone that influenced your faith as a young adult?
As an adult?

Was there ever a book or maybe even a movie
that deeply influenced your understanding of faith?

Is there a story from the Bible that has always captivated you?

I wonder...
is there a time or a moment or even a season in your life
that you felt closest to God, the sacred? A holy moment?

Is there a time or a moment or a season in your life
when you felt the greatest doubt or distance from God?

I wonder—was ever a time in your life
that you stepped away from faith,
or a season when faith was truly a struggle?

I wonder—was there ever a time in your life
when you left or stepped away from the *church*?

At what point did you recognize the importance of a community of faith?
Is there a time when it truly held you on the journey?

I wonder...
What's been one of the most beautiful parts of your life?
How do you think God was present in that experience?

What's been one of the hardest parts of your life in the past?
In what way do you think God was present?

What is one of the hardest parts of your life in the present?
In what way do you think God *is* present?

We've now come to the end of our line, up to the present day,
and the truth is, none of us know
what the line will look like tomorrow—
we don't know how the river, our story, our journey will continue.
But that's where hope comes in.
Hope is trusting in things unseen,
we hope in a future that is as-of-yet unfulfilled.

So I wonder, and here's one last set of questions,
and write your thoughts on the far right side—
what is it about Christianity that gives you hope?
What is it about your faith that gives you hope?
In what ways does your faith give you hope for the future?

Our Scripture reading says to always be prepared
to share the reason for the hope that you have—
and our hope comes out of all of our faith journey thus far.
And we all *have* a journey of faith—
a story of faith that somehow informs the hope
that we hold onto today.

When it comes to making space for the sharing,
when it comes to always being prepared to share the reason
for the hope that we have,
one of the simplest things for us to do is to take
one of the answers on our sheet
and share what it means to us with someone else.

But in the meantime,
I thought I would take just a little time this morning
to personally share some of the hope that I have—
hope that is informed by *my* faith journey.

And I hope that this will inspire you to do the same--
to prepare to share the reason for the hope that *you* have,
tomorrow, next week, and in the years to come.

So here are some of the reasons for the hope that I have...

I have hope
that there is a God
even if that God is far beyond
my complete comprehension and understanding,
because I have not yet found
a more compelling, captivating answer
to the existence of existence itself—
and believe me—I've tried.

I have hope
that life is not meant to be suffering
that God does not intend us to feel guilty or inadequate,
because my faith tells me
that God has created us to shine
that we are intended to reflect the beauty of the Creator,
and that the glory of God is a human being fully alive.

I have hope
that my faith tradition
is not at all an opiate for the masses
but rather an empowerment for people
to rise up and build a better world and way of being
because for me, Christianity is not an escape plan,
but rather, a way that says to the divine,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it *is* in heaven.

I have hope that such a better world is possible,
that the kingdom of God is here and near,
and that all of us can play a role in making it more real,
because a small group of thoughtful committed citizens
especially disciples, is truly capable of changing the world—
indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

I have hope
that the little bit of good that I do
in my own corner of the world
makes a difference
because the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed
a tiny little seed
yet, when it is sown,
it grows and becomes greater than all of the other plants and trees,
and puts out great branches
so that the birds of the sky can lodge under its shadow;
because sometimes
small faithful actions day by day
plant seeds for trees we may never see.

I have hope
that tomorrow will somehow be better than today,
even if in a gradual way,
because as a Christian,
I believe that the *ultimate* end of all things
is a renewal and a restoration and
a revelation
of a new heaven
and a new earth
and that there will come a time
when every tear is wiped away
and a day when the swords
will be truly beaten into ploughshares
and when the lions of the world will lay down with the lambs.

I have hope
that prayer has power—
not because I've necessarily seen it do something,
but because it *has* done something *in me*.

I have hope
that you and me,
we can change for the better,
that we can *be changed* for the better,
because God is at work,
continually renewing our minds
through the Spirit-filled work of sanctification,
“behold, behold,” God says,
“I am making all things new.”

I have hope
that we can risk
to be God's people entering into this new reality
with boldness
that we can be strong and courageous
and not be terrified or discouraged
because the Lord our God *will be with us*
absolutely wherever we choose to go.

I have hope
that those we deem our enemies will surprise us
like the Samaritan stopping by the side of the road
and I have hope too,
that *we* can surprise *those* that deem *us* an enemy,
by engaging in acts of care, ourselves,
by praying for those who persecute us,
by forgiving those who do not know what they are doing,
because that is what Jesus did
and who Jesus was
and who Jesus also calls us to be.

I have hope
that the church will survive
even if it does not look the same as before,
because if nothing else, we are an *Easter* people
and at the heart of our collective story
is a belief in resurrection, not resuscitation—
transformation is our business,
because it's always been God's business,
and God's not finished with us yet.

I have hope
that the church can
and will be a place of welcome
for *all* people
regardless of sexual orientation or gender identification
or socio-economic status or race or color or ethnic background
or any other barriers that we might put on belonging
that unity does not have to mean uniformity,
because in Christ,
there is neither free nor slave
nor Jew nor Greek,
nor male nor female,
for we are one people,
a diverse but intimately connected family of God.

I have hope
that the empires among us and around us,
the systems of exploitation, assimilation, and injustice,
will ultimately not prevail
because I trust that a house built on sandy land
will not stand
but a house built on solid rock will last for ages.

I have hope
that what *my house* stands on
is that rock,
that what I stand for stands for something,
because in Christ
we have been promised a sure foundation,
a cornerstone on which we can rely on fully.

I have hope
that truly, we are not alone
that in life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us,
because Jesus promised to his disciples
“lo, I am with you to the very end of the age,”
and God promised to Moses,
“My presence will go with you,
and I will give you rest,”
and in the words of the apostle John,
“whoever abides in love abides with God,
and God abides in them,”
and as Psalm 23 verse 4 proclaims,
“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me,
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

I have hope
because my faith is hopeful,
I have hope because my *God* is hopeful,
I have hope because this hope is precisely
what I have heard with my ears
and seen with my own eyes
and felt in my heart
and had stirred in my soul at several points along my journey.

I have hope.
And I hope that you may have this hope too.

Thanks be to God.