

"Hope Works"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, December 11, 2011

To hope is to wish for a specific outcome. To hope is to hold on to an expectation. Haven't we learned that hoping is fraught with peril? Haven't we been told enough times that we must let go of outcomes and not risk voicing the specifics of our desires? Someone told me this week, "I have been disappointed so many times that I have learned to lower my expectations." I get that. I understand how the pain of disappointment can lead some to become tough rather than strong: thickening their skin, causing them to choose fewer and fewer occasions where they will risk being vulnerable and lose the opportunity to grow stronger, and with every new layer, lose hope.

In Paul Loeb's book, *Soul of A Citizen*, he focuses on those who hope for specific outcomes and their struggles to see that change happen. I learned about Virginia Ramirez, who went from barely being able to read or write to leading change in the US Senate.

Too many of us hold back from community involvement because we think we don't and no status in the community, and then becomes a powerful voice for know enough to act on our beliefs, or don't have the standing or confidence to take a public stand. When we see a woman who begins with no money, no power, no education change, it should inspire us all to hope and work for the future we desire.

Virginia Ramirez, of San Antonio, Texas, could easily have lived out her days without ever discovering her ability to speak out. She left school after eighth grade to get married. She said, "That was what most Hispanic women in my generation did. My husband, who drives a taxicab, went to work after sixth grade." Although dropping out seemed normal at the time, she felt frustrated when she couldn't help her five children with their homework.

When Virginia was forty-five, she realized that an elderly neighbor was getting sick every winter. The neighbor was a widow who lived in a house so dilapidated that it couldn't retain heat. "She was one of those people who always paid her taxes on time, always faithfully making out her little money orders. But she couldn't afford to repair her house, and everyone around here was just as poor. So I went with her to city agencies trying to get help. They kept sending us from place to place, from department to department. Finally she died of pneumonia. The paramedics said she'd never have died if her house hadn't been so freezing cold.

"I'd never been so angry in my life," Virginia recalls. "This woman had done everything she was supposed to, and now she was dead because no one could help her fix her house." So it was with some hesitation that she attended a meeting at her church, where she raised her hand and said, "I have this problem. This neighbor lady of mine died because it was cold and they wouldn't fix her house. I want someone to

do something about it.” A few days later, a volunteer knocked on Virginia’s door and asked her why she was so angry. Virginia was angry, she said, because she’d tried to help the old lady and failed. She was upset because her kids weren’t getting properly educated in school. Because she’d given up on her own education and dreams. Because she’d had to watch her father, whom she’d adored, be humiliated again and again by police and store owners when they drove from state to state to pick crops. No one seemed to care about her community. The volunteer who was from COPS, a community organizing group, didn’t advise Virginia to do anything in particular. She just asked if they could talk again. When she returned, she suggested that Virginia hold a house meeting, to see if her neighbors had concerns too.

Nine people came. Virginia had never conducted a meeting. Her legs shook so much she almost fell over. She could barely open the door. But gradually people began to talk of their problems and experiences. Their neighborhood had been thrown together at the cheapest possible cost, built for workers at the now-closed nearby slaughterhouses. It lacked sidewalks and adequate sewers. Most of the houses were crumbling. As she listened, Virginia realized this was about the future of her community.

Virginia and the other COPS members painstakingly researched documents at City Hall, discovering that the city had built a street in a more affluent area with money earmarked to repair their barrio homes. Virginia’s next step—testifying before the City Council—felt terrifying. When she walked to the podium to protest the diversion of funds, she was so nervous she forgot what she was going to say. “I didn’t remember my speech. I barely remembered my name. Then I turned around, saw the people who’d come with me, and realized I was just telling the story of our community. So I told it, and we got our money back.

Virginia’s journey into public life wasn’t easy. She often prayed over whether her newfound path was right, asking God for guidance, “like what am I doing with these crazy people and where is it going to lead?”

Yet her involvement also strengthened her faith, giving new meaning to biblical lessons that had once seemed more remote and abstract. “Suddenly you read these stories about injustice from thousands of years ago,” Virginia says, “and it seems like they’re talking about today.”

During more than 20 years with COPS, she’s moved up in the organization, first training people in her parish, then working with other local churches to develop their members’ leadership skills as well. She’s focused particularly on women like herself. Using her own unexpected journey as an example, she’s taught them to find their own voice and speak out for their communities, despite any doubts or hesitations they might have.

Virginia realized how far she’d come when she went to Washington, D.C., to testify before a U.S. Senate committee on an innovative job-training program that she and other COPS members had helped develop.

I want Virginia on my team. Too often I encounter those in the world so blinded by cynicism and excuses that they retreat into their own world and make space for injustice to prevail. They have been

fooled into believing that their hopes don't matter. On this topic of cynicism, activist, professor, and author of two must-reads for those struggling to stay hopeful in their attempts to change the world, Paul Loeb, writes:

Cynicism wasn't always so disempowering. The first Cynics were a group of ancient Greek philosophers, most notably Diogenes, who caustically denounced the established culture of their time. Monk-like ascetics who preached simplicity, self-discipline, and self-sufficiency, they offered a moral alternative to the empty materialism, legalism, and religious hypocrisy that had come to dominate Greek society. Back then, to be a Cynic meant to stand up for one's convictions. In our time, however, cynicism comes in the guise of an all-knowing attitude that working for a larger common good is the vocation of the terminally innocent, leaving no likely outcome except heartbreak.¹

Cynicism unites people in their judgment of those who *are* hopeful as naïve, unrealistic and even ignorant. Cynicism connects people to one another in their desperate attempt to avoid heartbreak. But without the risk of heartbreak, what abides? In order to have the opportunity to experience and to know faith, hope, and love, we must risk the breaking of our own hearts. Because being hopeful requires us to be vulnerable.

In the Christian Scriptures, in Hebrews Chapter 1, it is written, "Hold fast to thy confession of hope". Hope is a confession of what is written across our hearts. Hope is to name what we desire, to speak the vision of our hearts into the world. And it is risky, because there is a possibility that the outcome we desire will not be manifested. If we don't know and name what we want – if we have no vision of the world as it could be – then we are trapped either in the world as it is, or in some accidental future that we passively helped to create.

I want to be on the team of people who actively participate in manifest their future, who take the gifts God has given them and use them. Those who bare their scars for others to see, because it is in our vulnerability, and it is in our speaking aloud of that vision of the world as it could be, that we are most inspired to hope despite the outcome. And dare I say? Why yes, in fact, I do... that it is the role of the church. The role of the church is in fact to help you seek what is written on the scars of your heart. It is the role of the church to help you find the courage and the strength to name the scars and the wounds behind them, because hearing that others have walked through the valley and come out on the other side in and of itself offers hope to those still needing light to find their way. And it is the role of the church to encourage you to name the change that you want to see in the world, that vision of the promised land, and to support you in finding a way to work to create it. Can I get an amen?

¹ Loeb, Paul "The Impossible will take a Little While"

In my time at All Souls I have met many manifestations of hope walking through our hallways. There are the hundreds of volunteers that keep our Children's and Youth Program running, offering a message of hope and inclusion in Tulsa not offered anywhere else. Those who volunteer to greet and welcome and usher to help our church run smoothly. There are the many volunteers who show up at McLain as reading buddies to spend one-on-one time investing in a child's future...often the most consistent relationship in that child's life. And those who are reaching out to the Laura Dester Shelter, and those who assist with all the amazing programming of our Partners in Education Program.

For me personally, hope has come in the form of cards, kind words, and real moments of presence when my father died recently. It is from our volunteers in this church and in the community that I have seen hope in action, that I have seen Hope *work*, for the work of hope indeed perpetuates hope. The work of the church is about the transformation of lives and the transformation of society. And so, by bonding together in our efforts despite the odds...not just because we have a common vision, not just because we are united in our free faith – faith in what is good and just and true – but because we have hopes: hopes that the children of Tulsa will not go to bed or to school hungry. Hopes about the improvement of our educational system, our health care system, our justice system, and our government.

We unite in our *faith* and in our *hopes*. As individuals, as a community, and as an organization, to have a voice in the conversation. But the voice of our free faith is not a cynical one. It is your voice, and it is the voice of reason, and it is the voice of hope. And so it is that in church we gather to tell stories of those who have hoped beyond disappointment, those who hope in the face of disaster, disease, and death. Those who hope in the face of affliction, aversion, and apathy. So that we might be inspired to do the same. Sonya Tinsley refers to them as those, “always telling stories of faith being rewarded, of ways things could be different, of how their own lives have changed. [Who..will] give you reasons why you shouldn't give up, testimonials why we've yet to see our full potential as a species. They believe we are partners in God's creation, and that change is really possible.” Jesus was like that.

But the hope of the world mostly comes in the form of everyday folk doing everyday tasks. And it comes from extraordinary folks doing extraordinary tasks. I'd like to tell you about just a few of those folks that inspire me in our congregation. Because of my late inclusion of these stories in my sermon I did not have time to seek their permission to include them, so the names are not real but by their works they may be known.

Hope has taken the form of Linda, a businesswoman by day. A member of our Oklahoma Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights, who shows up regularly on Saturday mornings in order to escort women from their cars to the front door of Reproductive Services. These are women she does not know. And even though she is not certain how she would handle an unwanted pregnancy or a pregnancy complication, she believes that these women deserve dignity and respect as she greets them with a smile and does her best to shield them from the protestors condemning her and her decision.

There is John, retired by profession, who quit his job as a graphic designer of a major company in town in order to fulfill his dream of making a difference in our schools by becoming an 8th grade science teacher; trying as hard as he can to bolster the aspirations of our underprivileged youth. There's Ed, who since 1993 has spent most Wednesdays and Saturdays working for our Housing Outreach program renovating houses in low income areas of Tulsa. He doesn't take compliments well, doesn't wish to be thanked. He just believes that if he can do something to help he should. And meanwhile, people's homes and lives are bettered by his work.

There's Lewis: he has been the executive director of a non-profit helping the homeless in Tulsa and gives of his time and talent on our Board of Trustees, helping guide our executive decisions. There's Mary: she just called me this week to see how she could include the church in her estate. She says she doesn't have much, but what she has she wants magnified by the good deeds of this church and to benefit the children of our membership. And Annie, who volunteers at every memorial service making sandwiches, and ushering, and pouring coffee for the grieving. And all those who give of their time, talent, and treasure in the church and the community, displaying their hope and vision of a changed world.

Think about your hope of a changed world: what could you do this week to take one step in that direction and be someone else's hope? Historian, activist, and contributor to Paul Loeb's collection of inspiring writings, Howard Zinn writes:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places — and there are so many — where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the small a way, possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, a marvelous victory.

Choose your team wisely! Surround yourself with hopeful people whenever you can. On this third Sunday of Advent, we are reminded to prepare ourselves. For in the midst of darkness, in the midst of winter, the light has come to guide us to hope. You are surrounded by that light right now.

May it guide you to hope.