

Love, Hope and . . . Power?

Psalm 130

June 6, 2021

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

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Our reading from the Hebrew Bible is Psalm 130.

I will tell you at the outset what strikes me about this psalm: it contains a surprising trio of concepts. We are familiar with Paul's trio: faith, hope, and love. "*But the greatest of these is love.*" The poet of ancient Israel puts together a different combination: love, hope and . . . power. That's what I want us to think about this morning.

The psalm concludes with these words:

*O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with the Lord is great power to redeem.
It is the Lord who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.*

You can hope, the poet told his people, because in God there is love and there is power. Put differently, love and strength, love and power make hope possible.

Last week in one of his daily meditations, Fr. Richard Rohr wrote about "foundational hope." By which he means that there is an "unfolding inner dynamism in all creation (that) is moving in a positive direction. A divine goal is always before us, waiting to be unveiled." The "world is . . . always unfolding to something better."

I must admit that sounded a bit pollyannaish to me. In my other life, one I began after I retired the second time, I write opinion pieces for a couple of newspapers in North Carolina. My day starts with a cup of coffee and the local paper and continues with another cup of coffee and e-editions of national newspapers and other websites. I gotta tell you, having your head stuck in the news all day, it's hard to believe that "*the whole cosmic arc is (on) a trajectory toward the good.*"

Yet, scripture admonishes us, "*Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that lies within you . . .*" even if, on some days, hope appears to be on life support.

What reason do we have to be hopeful?

In his essay, Fr. Rohr quoted extensively from a new book by Steve Charleston, "Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder's Meditations on Hope and Courage." Steve Charleston is not only a Choctaw elder; he is also an Episcopal bishop.

In his book Bishop Charleston offers two signs of hope. First, the human capacity to love.

Sometimes, in this troubled world of ours, we forget that love is all around us. We imagine the worst of other people and withdraw into our own shells. But try this simple test: Stand still in any crowded place and watch the people around you. Within a very short time, you will begin to see love, and you will see it over

and over and over. A young mother talking to her child, a couple laughing together as they walk by, an older man holding the door for a stranger—small signs of love are everywhere. The more you look, the more you will see. Love is literally everywhere. We are surrounded by love.

It is important to note that the bishop directed our attention to love on the micro level – the interpersonal level of moms and their children, in-love couples, and strangers helping strangers. He did not direct our attention to love at the macro level. He did not say:

Stand still in any crowded place – say for example, the halls of Congress -- and watch the people around you. Within a very short time, you will begin to see love, and you will see it over and over and over. A young Republican representative helping an older Democrat to his/her feet, Mitch McConnell and Nancy Pelosi, arm in arm, singing “Kumbaya.” The more you look, the more you will see. Love is literally everywhere.

I suspect it was a deliberate choice on the part of the bishop to highlight love on the micro level, the interpersonal level, instead of the macro level.

I may have shared with you in another sermon that some time ago I had the same revelation Bishop Charleston had. Downtown Winston-Salem is the highest point in the city. When you leave downtown, no matter which street you take, you go downhill. One day around dusk I was driving north out of downtown, and I looked out over a neighborhood. Streetlights were coming on, and there were lights in the windows of most of the houses. It was a beautiful Americana-ish tableau. The thought popped into my mind, as Bishop Charleston probably would have predicted, “I bet there is love in that house and that house and that one and that one.” I quickly became overwhelmed by the thought that we really are surrounded by love.

Now, if you want to object and say, “Most of the problems we face today are because love is restricted by race and class and gender and all sorts of human qualifiers,” you’ll get no argument from me. I’m just saying don’t go there too quickly. We can celebrate the human capacity to love and still acknowledge that the challenge is to break down some of the channels that direct love to only people who believe, live, look, and love the way we believe, live, look, and love.

The heart is not inflexible. It can be expanded. That the human capacity to love can be altered in light of further revelations and new understandings is a fact to which most of us can attest. If you are retirement age, I can almost guarantee that your attitude about homosexuality has changed in the last 40 years. Perhaps even your attitudes about race.

The heart can be expanded. Not easily. Not quickly. But it happens all the time. The human capacity for love, the bishop said, is a sign of hope.

Bishop Charleston offered a second sign of hope: the spiritual energy we see bubbling up as love expresses itself in acts. He writes:

The signs are all around us. We can see them springing up like wildflowers after the prairie rain. People who had fallen asleep are waking up. People who

had been content to watch are wanting to join. People who never said a word are speaking out. The tipping point of faith is the threshold of spiritual energy, where what we believe becomes what we do.

Once again, the bishop's observations resonated with me. A year ago, there were marches and demonstrations across the country following the murder of George Floyd.

I know that some of the demonstrations turned violent. The overwhelming majority did not.

I participated in a couple marches locally. In one march, I asked a fellow straggler, "Where are we headed?"

"I have no idea," she laughed. No one around us seemed to know.

I looked up the street and a wave of apprehension swept over me when I realized that ahead on the right loomed the police station.

I stepped to the side to get a better view of whatever was going to happen, and I saw the leading edge of the column approach the intersection and turn right, being careful to stay in the street or on the sidewalk.

I knew then that there would be no burned police cruisers, no broken windows or smashed storefronts. Not from a group that, despite its justified anger and frustration — decades old, centuries old — wouldn't walk on the grass in front of the police station.

One of the things I noticed — this has been pointed out by many people — was the large number of white people marching. This was not simply a "Black thing." Clearly, the killing of George Floyd touched something in Americans across racial lines. As the bishop said, *'People who had fallen asleep are waking up. People who had been content to watch are wanting to join. People who never said a word are speaking out.'* I would add, churches, including staid old downtown churches across the South, are sponsoring reading groups to discuss books about race that they would have banned their church libraries a decade or two ago.

The other thing I noticed — and I noticed this right away — was that there was no one even close to my age. I thought I would see some of the old crowd, the veteran marchers from the old days. People in my age group. But marches are not designed for folks on walkers. I decided that we need our own march — a geriatric march. You walk a block, and then there's a place to sit down and drink some iced tea. Along the way, there are organizers holding up signs saying, "Proceed at your own pace." You're allowed to bring a grandkid along to carry your sign.

Bishop Charleston called it "spiritual energy." I think it is what the psalmist meant by "power" or strength. It is, he said, a sign of hope.

Both the bishop and the psalmist understood that there is a dynamic in love that leads invariably to action.

When you love your family, you do something; you make sacrifices, you take a second job, you reduce the scale of your dreams so you can save money for your kids' college.

When you love your country, you do something; you vote, you get involved in your community, you join the military or perform some other service.

When you're committed to your favorite cause, you do something; you donate money, you volunteer, you knock on doors.

Love compels us to do something.

There is a dynamic in love, a spiritual energy. We see the effects of that energy, that power, all around us.

Bishop Charleston writes: *“When that power is released, there is no stopping it, for love is a force that cannot be contained. Look and see the thousands of new faces gathering from every direction.”*

Then he says – and I believe this is where he was headed all along – *“There is the sign of hope for which you have been waiting.”* You’ve been looking for signs of hope – there they are.

When people stop speaking up, when they stop showing up, when they stop sacrificing for the larger good because they no longer believe there is a larger good, that is a sign – a sign that cynicism and despair have triumphed over love and hope.

But as long as love beats in the human breast, as long as love is a flexible, growing, expanding thing, capable of powerful expressions, that too is a sign – a sign of hope in a sometimes darkened world.

Benediction

There are four massive columns in front of the First Baptist Church in Winston-Salem. Between the columns hang three large banners. The logo of the church is on the banner in the middle. On the other two banners are phrases from a favorite hymn, “Great is thy Faithfulness.” I offer those phrases as a blessing and a benediction. Through God’s grace may you be granted “strength for today, bright hope for tomorrow.” Amen.