

St. Albert the Great Catholic Church,
Minneapolis Nov. 13, 2016



“If it were not for hope, the human heart would break.”

Walking through Calvary Cemetery in Saint Paul, I came across a tombstone bearing the phrase: “If it were not for hope, the human heart would break.” Judging from the dates etched on the marker, the child was less than two years old when she died. Immediately, I thought of conversations I have had with parents whose children have died. The searing pain of loss, and the absence of a future with these children, easily created a sense of paralysis and despair. Finding a way through the dense darkness of death and ambiguous loss requires a faith that allows one to hope while searching for light. The recent discovery of the body of Jacob Wetterling, who had been missing for nearly twenty-seven years, brought an odd sense of closure for his parents, Patty and Jerry, his three siblings and the entire state of Minnesota. Jacob was kidnapped on October 22, 1989. His family never gave up hoping for his return. Armed with an abiding sense of faith, the family never wavered in their hope of finding Jacob. In recognizing Jacob's death and the death of any child, we are called out of our denial into the stark and painful reality of an indelible wound that will always bear the scar of loss. Struggling with the myth of closure, we can hesitantly assume that the good will of those who love us and that the grace of God will grant us some modicum of peace. There is no way to comprehend the death of a child, except through the eyes of faith and hope. “If it were not for hope, the human heart would break.”

Sorting through the incomprehensible array of losses that confront us as human beings requires a faith not easily understood in the swirling cluster of ordinary human emotions found in the grieving process. Often, during a liturgy or a talk I might be giving, I am conscious of the enormity of hidden pain and sorrow in the brave faces of those who have undergone bewildering losses. Confusion, fear, anger, anxiety, uncertainty and doubt can, and often do, lead to denial, lethargy and depression. Putting on a happy face is not a bad strategy for recovery, but it is no permanent answer to a genuine acceptance of loss. To ease us out of a catatonic state of mind, the gift of hope provides a roadmap out of denial and a world of magical thinking. Beginning to imagine a future and the possibility of tomorrow is not a surrendering of the catastrophic reality of one's loss; it is allowing for faith and hope to awaken the heart to life without the presence of a loved one. As I struggle with the recent death of my oldest sibling, I have come face to face with the absence of one who has known me all my life. Lost are the peculiar rituals of a lifetime lived in the company of one another. In the intertwining of our lives over these many years, memories of sorrow and joy now come together with my tears in the acceptance of her physical absence. “If it were not for hope, the heart would break.”

In dealing with loss and uncertainty, the readings for the Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time captivate the community with apocalyptic levels of paranoia and frightening change. Hyper vigilance becomes the watchword in our first reading from the Prophet Malachi (4:1-2). His cataclysmic predictions set an ominous theme:

“See the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all arrogant and evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes will burn them up so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”

Plagued with uncertainty and political insecurity, Malachi challenges the post-exilic community of Israelites who have grown comfortable, lax in their prayer rituals, lukewarm in their faith, and disillusioned. Malachi assures them that if they persevere in remembering their God, “*The sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.*” As we prepare to end the liturgical year, the study of the end times (eschatology) becomes imperative. As Advent signals the end of time, it also offers us the hope of the redemptive work of Jesus as Messiah. Soon and very soon, the musical strains of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” will trigger the hope

that will sustain the grieving and heart-broken among us.

The invitation to perseverance is at the heart of the gospel teachings and the ultimate triumph of patience would become an invitation to salvation. The messianic promise of Jesus would be preserved in the early Christian Communities, but would not guarantee immunity from suffering, pain, persecution and death. St. Paul in his Second Letter to the Thessalonians (3:7-12) offered a heightened sense of conviction that Jesus was coming at any moment, so be alert! Paul was adamant that community members, even in their grief and uncertainty, would not become burdens on the community. In fact, he advised: “*Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.*” Paul was addressing freeloaders who were taking advantage of the generosity of the Christian community. Paul, like Jesus, was a teacher who understood that one teaches better through actions than through than words. Perhaps it was Paul who first coined the aphorism: “Jesus is coming, look busy!”

Creating a context for apocalyptic thinking, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Roman army in 70 A. D. provided a rude awakening to Christians throughout the Roman Empire. Persecutions and the deaths of Christians followed Christian communities everywhere. Our gospel reading for today's liturgy becomes a harbinger of eschatological thinking in the preaching of Jesus, who repeatedly stated that his kingdom was not of this earth. The gospel of Luke (20:27-38) fires our imaginations with catastrophic intensity and dire predictions about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. All three Synoptic gospels (Matthew 24:1-3; Mark 13:14; Luke 20:27-38) speak directly to the destruction of the Temple. The distressing message of Jesus regarding persecution of his followers creates an edge of panic among his disciples and prompted them to ask: “*Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?*” Jesus assures his faithful disciples that even though they are rounded up and put on trial because of his name:

“I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand and contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and friends, and they will put some of you to death, but not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance, you will gain your souls.”

Jesus' words are comforting, but demand a genuine willingness to “let go, and let God.” While there is a certain cliché ring to the phrase, the willingness to trust in the providential care of Jesus demands a confidence that might prove to be rather elusive when “push comes to shove.” Jesus counsels his disciples to remain calm, for all that they need, and need to say, will be provided. Perhaps a walk-through Calvary Cemetery might offer all of us an infusion of hope during our doubts. Accepting the limitations of life and the unpredictable catastrophes that might befall us, discovering the courage to hope once again is, indeed, a gift we can give ourselves and to others.

Having survived the muckraking and circus-like presidential campaign for the past year, we, as a nation, search for hope amid profound differences. Seeking some modicum of forgiveness and peace, we pray that the nation will regain a status reflecting the need to work for the common good. Moving beyond the rhetoric of clandestine emailing or non-filtered tweeting, we must address our grief, anger and differences in candid conversations based upon civility and respect. Rediscovering faith in a true democratic process, we can become a nation of hope. Indeed, “if it were not for hope, our hearts would break.”

Peace, Fr. Joe Gillespie, O.P.

Pastor