

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship  
May 30, 2010  
Anita Rediger

### **“Hope Does Not Disappoint”**

A few years ago, after the third cutting of hay had been made... in late July, Martin and I took a road trip to Michigan. That’s the way that farmers plan things... “after planting is finished...when the spraying is done...after the hay is made...” It’s a tricky way to manage life which otherwise runs by the calendar- not by the season or the whimsy of the weather!

As we traveled, we stopped at a restaurant with an adjacent gift shop and as I was browsing there I came upon this little glass bird. **(Take bird to church)** It caught my eye as it sat there among other glassware made of Fenton glass. My grandmother had enjoyed pieces of Fenton glass, I remembered. This little bird also immediately caused Emily Dickinson’s poem “Hope” to come to mind. Remember the first line???

*“Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul...”*

I remember that I had felt quite stressed that summer and was very grateful for the chance to be away...and with Martin. I bought the little bird that day to remind me of the gift of hope...and it has “perched” on the window sill in the living room ever since.

Today’s text from Paul’s letter to the Romans is short but packed with “Good News!” It is also loaded with words that each deserves a lot more attention than we can give them this morning: suffering, patience, character...hope. For me, the ones that catch my eye- at this time in my life - and set my mind to wondering are the words found on each end of the passage, the words “suffering” and “hope.” The scripture links them in an almost “cause and effect” manner; yet, at the same time, we know that it isn’t a simple algorithm that automatically flows from “suffering → patience→ character→ hope.” Paul’s list isn’t quite as straightforward as it may seem. Even in the best of situations, we know that these deep shifts in life-experience don’t come easily; they don’t come cheaply. We also know that sometimes suffering results in unbearable despair.

I find myself asking, how could Paul write these “encouraging” words to the Roman church? And how were these words received? Don’t you just love it when in the midst of the flu – when you haven’t showered for three days, when your hair follicles ache...when your energy sinks and your temp rises- don’t you just love it when...someone tells you, “oh, I’m sure you’ll feel better in a week or so.” Or, at times of truly great sorrow, perhaps when a child has died, that well-meaning people, say unhelpful things like, “At least you have your other children...or...you can have another baby soon.” These words are meant to be “hopeful” but more often feel “hurtful.”

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So what do we do with this scripture that seems to effortlessly link suffering and hope? It leads me to first of all ask myself a few questions.

1. When I hear the word “hope” what **am** I really “hoping for?”
  - a. Is it something that I’m looking forward to...like, “I hope that we have apple pie for dessert?”
  - b. Is it a way of expressing anxiety...such as, “I sure hope that it doesn’t freeze now that the corn has come up.”
  - c. Is it a way of expressing a desire to prevent suffering...like, “I hope that the test results don’t reveal cancer.”
  - d. To have “hope” do I have to *feel* “hopeful?”

Let’s return to the text and look more closely at the “hope” of which Paul is writing. Paul writes of a “hope that does not disappoint.” Well, if I hold up this kind of hope to the questions which I’ve just asked of myself, I can see that Paul is inviting me to a hope of a different quality than I’ve been thinking about. Whereas, we might not have apple pie for dessert – as I had hoped for...and the frost might well come to nip the corn plants...and the test may well reveal cancer...Paul writes of a hope that does not disappoint. What can this be... “hope that does not disappoint?” Is there really any such thing?

What kind of hope – “hope that does not disappoint” would this be for:

- Judy Sprunger in her ongoing marathon with cancer
- Jamie and his young adult children...as they seek to get their bearings following Karen’s death
- So many of our Swiss Village residents who experience losses all around them
- The creatures and people of the Gulf of Mexico
- The millions of people around the world whose lives are filled with the accumulation of past hurts & present challenges/personal & collective?

Two weeks ago, I was delighted and privileged to officiate at the wedding of Andrew Barrett, III and Angela Long. Andy and Pam gave me just the perfect gift as a remembrance of our weekend together – a Starbucks mug...alongside of the possible coffee choices that could be indicated on the mug, “decaf, milk, syrup”...there is a rather surprising one...marked with a bold “**X**” is a box ordering “hope!” The theme which had emerged for the wedding weekend was precisely this – we celebrated new beginnings; we celebrated a hope which does not disappoint.

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So what is this hope? What is its source? And why doesn't it disappoint, like some of our other "hopes?"

Paul writes that...

- This hope is God's love. And it isn't just a pre-packed, carefully rationed container of God's love – No...it is Love which has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit...given to us." Love...poured into our hearts...through the power of the Holy Spirit which has come to us as a gift. An abundant hope...

As our call to worship proclaimed this morning,

***God of grace and glory, who made all things,***

***How majestic is your name in all the earth!***

***God of grace and glory, ever present with us,***

***How reassuring is the love with which you  
surround us!***

When our hope is in the love of God, it is not an illusion or simply a wishful fantasy, for God loves us with a steadfast love, which is "fleshed out" by the Spirit of Christ among us. God's love keeps coming at us like the oil in the widow's flask. It is new every morning. As we receive this gift...God's love floods over us. It provides us with strength, with compassion, and with heart-felt longing to share that love with others---even in our own times of struggle. Perhaps especially then...

Recently, a friend told me of a conversation he had had with a close friend who is dying of cancer. The man is aware that he is dying. He is so grateful for the sense of others around who are aware of this and who care about him. He is taking a positive attitude in what he "knows" is a terminal situation. He is undergoing chemo now---not with the intention of reversing his own situation, but rather of using his situation as a testing ground for new treatments, so that his children and grandchildren will have a much better life. "If my life here can be dedicated---even in the stages of dying—to the prevention of death for others, then my life and even my death will continue to have the same kind of valuable meaning that it had when I was well enough to be up and about or when I was actively involved in my work that actively contributed to making life better for others.

This man is living with a "hope that does not disappoint." This Hope calls us to continue to live in ways that affirms God as the central focus and empowering force in our lives---In contrast to the troubles and tragedies that are part of our lives. Linda's observation: at any given time 95% of co-workers are facing some really tough things. (And if you're in the 5% that isn't right now, you will.) Things happen to us and we suffer – but we do not suffer alone—God is with us – coming to us in the quiet places of an early morning, through the bright beauty of Spring flowers, through the love and presence of the faith community. God's love empowers our living; even when it would seem that we *should* be hope-less, even when we *feel* hopeless! Yes, we will struggle with tragedy, pain and suffering, but we live with a "hope that does not disappoint," the hope of resurrection to new life. We are a resurrection

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people! This hope comes to us – again and again- poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us *as a gift*. Even when we feel like we've come to "a dead end", we dare to hope that refreshed by the deep well of God's love, old things pass away and all things will be made new. We dare to believe the great promise that the love of God – will never to leave us or forsake us – even if times of peril, hardship.....no matter what! This is our faith...our hope – and one which does not disappoint!. AMEN