

“OUR HOPE IS BUILT ON...”

Psalm 24:1-6; Colossians 1:1-14

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Faith, hope, and love. It is undoubtedly true, as Paul writes to the church at Corinth, that the greatest of these is love. But if you wanted to destroy love, a little faithlessness and hopelessness would be an effective place to start. A broken faith has torn apart marriages, friendships, families. It has set countries at war and stands behind divisions based on differences of race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Where there is no hope, there is no will to struggle for justice, for healing in relationships. There is no path to joy, and no way to sustain love. Faith, hope and love depend on each other, and they feed each other. They build each other up. So even though Paul says that the greatest is love, love cannot do without the other two. He says in his description of love that it both “hopes all things” and “believes all things.”

I begin with the hope that is built on faith. To the saints in Colossae, Paul offers thanks for their faith in Christ Jesus. Central to the faith of Jesus was his understanding that at all times, he was living in God’s world. His ministry began with the announcement of “God’s kingdom.” Indeed, he believed that God had entered the world through his presence. He became the example of how God relates to the world, demonstrating this with healing, forgiveness, compassion, faithfulness, and love.

“The earth is the Lord’s,” said the psalmist. And those who stand in right relationship with the earth, who “ascend the hill of God,” come with clean hands, a pure heart, a commitment to the truth, and a word that can be trusted. Jesus fit this description when he affirmed the widow’s mite as more generous than man of wealth, when he turned the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” on its head and reframed it as “To whom are you a neighbor?” His devotion to the Sabbath as an opportunity to do good, exposing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders was a commitment to the truth. His refusal to do violence and suffer death, evidence of clean hands, his compassion for the crowd, an outflowing from a pure heart.

This is the faith that Paul affirms in the saints at Colossae when he writes of the gospel bearing fruit in the world and amongst them. This fruit was a contrast to the fruit boasted of by occupying Rome which believed that the path to world peace lay through conquest and the rule of law.

Faith that rises from a practice of doing no harm, from a love for the earth and its inhabitants, from holding up truth, and maintaining integrity, builds hope. It is the faith of saints. Not the kind of saints who neglect the welfare of others for their own personal sense of righteousness. Not the kind of saints who abandon the world to its own devices. Not perfect saints, but saints who stand on God’s grace, listen for God’s call, and love; love the earth, love people, love engaging life in ways that serve the interests of God and all the people. As long as there are saints exercising this kind of faith, there is hope.

But that faith does not exist apart from love. Love is also doing its work to build hope in our world. Paul writes, “we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints...” Shortly I’m going to talk about our love for the saints, because of course, that’s what I really want to talk about this morning. But isn’t it true that we love the saints because they first loved us. Without their love, there would be no faith. There’d be no hope. And we are a community full of faith, and hope, and love. Thanks in large part to the saints who have preceded us.

When I think about the saints who have loved me, building up my faith and hope, I think of Sunday school teachers who made the Bible familiar to me. I think of Ron, Don, Vickie, Sue, Debbie, Lisa and many other peers from high school who showed me that the Bible was accessible and relevant to untrained seekers with ears to hear and hearts open to the grace of God. I think of Dave and the saints at Friendship in Pittsburgh who centered compassion, worked to break down racial barriers, and lived their faith by caring for children and youth, and made homes and home improvements affordable.

When I think about the saints who have loved me, I think about Doug, a NT professor who gladly gave me an extension on my work when my brother died. I think of Jared who brought all the academic tools available to the study of the Old Testament not to impress us with his brilliance (though he was that) but to demonstrate that we didn’t have to set aside our brains to hear God speak through the Bible. I remember the folks of Trinity Presbyterian Church who welcomed the ministry of amateur seminary students, giving us and many before us a place to practice preaching, and learn pastoral care.

So many saints who have nurtured my faith, whose love continues to sustain me in the work of ministry. Too many to name. There are days when hope wains, but when I think about the saints who have loved me, hope thrives.

On this day, when we remember the saints whom we have lost this past year, I am reminded that not all our saints belong to the faith community. And yet they are saints for the hope they instill in us. I think of mom who not only saw that I got to church most weeks, but rode in the ambulance with me after I was hit by a car, and who saw that I was fed, and clothed, and wanted for nothing; of my dad who would engage my mind with a game of chess after his long day at the office and spoke not a word of criticism after two failed attempts at college; of teachers and coaches, of friends, brothers and extended families. I think of authors who have shaped thinking on a variety of topics, of public figures who have advocated services for people in need, of activists who have fought for civil rights and others who continue the work of standing with those marginalized for whatever reason.

If you want to sustain hope, love the saints. They never really leave us. They have marked us and shaped us into the people that we are. They may belong to the past, but they rarely stay there. Their love keeps entering our world, building up the hope that keeps us going.

They're not all dead, of course. Paul calls the faith community in Colossae "saints." And so I think of you as saints as well. You keep hope alive for me. You reinforce for me the truth that God still speaks through scripture. You open up the Bible for me. You are examples of God's presence for me in my life. You demonstrate compassion for a world much in need. You offer yourselves up as healers, mentors, workers, advocates and activists to a world craving helpers of this sort. You're not perfect, mind you, but you do bring the love of God into the world through hospitality, service, truth-telling, and compassion. Your faith, and love, dear saints, build up hope. And I thank God for you. Amen.