

“The Nature of Christian Hope”
Romans 8:18—25
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Hope is a central concern of Christian faith, as it is in life. We talk often of hope, we preach often about hope, but there are certain realities that push us to think more deeply about the nature of hope.

In this month’s issue of *The Christian Century*, Libby Howe writes about how the combination of COVID and the contemporaneous racial injustices called into question the depth of her view of hope (July 2023, p. 27). When people faced daunting challenges, she used to parrot some cliché like, “Don’t let it bother you too much. There’s always hope, right?” Not wanting to be overwhelmed by tragedies and injustices, she says she would apply a hope Band-Aid and walk away unscathed.

Then, a pandemic hit, along with numerous incidents of racial injustice, and suddenly glib talk about a superficial kind of hope became painfully inadequate. She wrote this in her journal. “My whole life I’ve described God as the ultimate spirit-life-breath-force and ever-abiding presence. So, what am I to do with a worldwide plague of literal breathlessness and crushing loneliness? Who is this God I have spoken and clung to for so long? A fantasy? A divine stuffed toy to bring comfort when there is none?”

Suffering and tragedy point to the absurdity of superficial assurances and inevitably prompt such questions. We don’t say to young children who have lost a parent, “Don’t worry, it will all be okay.” Will it? In what sense will it be okay? We wouldn’t say to a refugee from the war in Ukraine who has lost home, family, and everything that matters to them, “Don’t let it bother you. There is always hope.” Is there? Hope for what exactly? We shouldn’t offer a cliché of assurance to someone who has experienced suffering unlike any we have known — the victims of racism, all who have experienced generational poverty, those who have lost loved ones to violence. We want to offer something helpful, perhaps even hope, but what is the nature of the hope we offer?

The Apostle Paul would understand our questions. Writing to the church at Rome, he points to hope, to something beyond what he calls “the sufferings of this present time.” But he also says, “Hope that is seen is not hope.” This is no glib word of assurance nor is it a Band Aid for a gaping wound. Paul offers no guarantee of a specific outcome or happy ending. He affirms the place of hope, but at the very same time, he invites deeper reflection on its nature. Such reflection will inform our thinking and benefit those we seek to help.

So, what is the nature of Christian hope? It begins with the belief that with God’s help, quite often something different and better is possible. When Paul says that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is about to be revealed to us, he isn’t just talking about eternity, he is also talking about a future reality in this life. When he talks about creation groaning in labor pains, and us as well, as we wait for adoption, he is talking about a yearning for a world where things are as they are supposed to be, as God intends them to be.

Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Why would he ask us to pray for something that is not possible, that can never happen? While it may seem like some things will never change — the poor will be with us always, as will racism, gun violence, warfare, and political division — in God’s grace, change is possible. Very few things are fixed.

An old story about early nineteenth-century Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher illustrates this reality (*On Being a Real Person*, Harry Emerson Fosdick, p. 15). One Sunday Beecher had planned to exchange pulpits with a minister who held a very rigid view of predestination while Beecher held a more liberal view. When they met midway on horseback, Beecher’s colleague said, “Doctor Beecher, I wish to call to your attention that before the creation of the world, God arranged that you were to preach in my pulpit and I in yours on this particular Sabbath.” “Is that so?” Beecher said, glaring at him, “Then I won’t do it!” And at that point, he turned his horse and returned to his church.

Rigid views of predestination may not be that prevalent today, but a secular form of fatalism is common, along with a pessimistic view of human

nature. Many people today feel like nothing is ever going to change. We feel this way at times. And if we function out of this assumption, insofar as things depend on us, they won't change. But change is possible. Very few things are fixed. God is still at work for good. And Paul says we have the first fruits of the Spirit as a kind of assurance, motivation to keep laboring for good.

We might consider the challenges of affordable housing in this city which we have talked about as part of our potential future building use. Housing in general includes a wide range of challenges from homelessness to affordable housing to workforce housing, all of which plague us here. Habitat for Humanity's vision of a world where everyone has a decent place to live is fabulous, but it needs to be affordable. Is there any hope of that happening?

We see the numbers, how many people are struggling, and how expensive housing is. What can we do? Perhaps not much, and if we believe the situation is hopeless, we won't do anything. But if we do what we can; develop a plan to house as many people as we can; and other churches, synagogues, and mosques do the same; and local, state, and federal governments continue to help, along with some sectors of the business community; it is possible. There is hope, and not only that, our capacity for hope can help create a better future.

But what do we do when something different and better doesn't happen, even when we trust in God and do our best? The concept of hope is wonderful, but at some point, we have to confront those occasions when there is no happy ending. What does our faith say about those situations and how are we to live in light of them?

Ethicist Miguel A. De La Torre has written extensively about hope and hopelessness from a liberationist perspective in the Latinx context (as reviewed in *The Christian Century*, July 2023, p.27). He has said that he doesn't hope in English, but only in Spanish, noting that *esperanza*, the word for hope in Spanish, is related to the verb "to wait." This squares with what Paul says in our reading from Romans, "If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." Genuine hope often involves patient waiting. But it involves more than this.

De La Torre argues that the church must base our shared life not on what we can achieve (happy endings), or on what we believe (correct doctrine), but

on how we behave as followers of Jesus (praxis). The questions that matter, he says, are these: are we living in solidarity with the least of these or benefiting from their exploitation, are we on the side of liberation or oppression? We might add questions like: are we offering comfort to those who grieve, are we offering support to those in need of healing, are we telling others about our experience with Jesus?

We may not be able to eradicate poverty and injustice, we may not be able to heal every disease or bring back loved ones who are lost, we may not be able to convince everyone around us to embrace Christian faith, but we can labor faithfully in the trust that change is possible, and even when it doesn't happen, our faithful labor still matters. It matters to those we seek to help and to the One who is always working with us.

When Mother Teresa was asked how she could continue working among the poor and outcast when there always seem to be more poor and outcast people, she replied, "God never asked me to be successful, only to be faithful." Such is our calling.

But how do we find the strength to keep laboring for good, even when it doesn't seem to be happening? Faithful people answer this question in different ways. For some, the knowledge that we are following Jesus is all that is needed. But there is another motivator, another component of Christian hope. It is tied to our view of the cross as seen through the lens of the resurrection.

The cross appears to be a tragedy. The Messiah dies a brutal death, his efforts have been in vain, all hope is lost. But death does not have the final word, hope is not defeated, Jesus' efforts have not been in vain.

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner concludes his comments on the cross with these words. "A six-pointed star, a crescent moon, a lotus — the symbols of other religions suggest beauty and light. The symbol of Christianity is an instrument of death. It suggests, at the very least, hope (p. 19)."

It may seem like a strange way to put it, but ours is an unusual kind of hope, one that not only persists in the face of profound suffering, but one that transforms the meaning of that suffering. If God can bring life out of death,

what is left for us to fear? If God can transform the cross into a symbol of hope, what part of our lives and world is beyond hope?

It is not just pie-in-the-sky theology, though it is comforting to know that there is hope for more for loved ones who have suffered and died, there is hope for more for us. Episcopal rector and Jungian analyst Morton Kelsey once said that if this life is all there is, we are insane if we do not grieve bitterly at death. Life is but a sandcastle on a beach, interesting for a time at death, then wiped away completely at death.

But if this life is not all there is, life has enduring value. Even suffering and hardship take on different meaning, as they do not have the final word on life. In our reading from Romans, Paul puts it this way: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." Individual hope is transformed by belief in the resurrection.

But Christian hope is about more than our personal fate in eternity, and the cross means more than hope for the next life. It means that suffering and sacrifice are not futile. God's purposes will not be thwarted. We may not see the completion of the beloved community, but it will be completed. Our efforts matter. God and life and love and peace and justice ultimately will prevail. Sometimes this is our only basis for hope, but it is all the motivation we need to be faithful.

I think of the Jesuits who passionately fight for the freedom of indigenous South American people in the film *The Mission*. It is set in the mid-eighteenth century, the Portuguese have enslaved the native people, and the Roman Church is only interested in evangelism. I should offer a spoiler alert to those who have not seen the film, but the Jesuits are killed. They refuse to take up arms, they die, and seemingly with them dies all hope for the people they have sought to free.

It is a tragic story... or is it? From the perspective of our faith, death is not the end for these Jesuits nor is all hope lost for the enslaved people. In time, they will be free. History tells us this, but so does our faith even before it happens. The message of the cross is: God wins, no matter what! In the end, it is on this truth that we base our hope.