

## **REJOICE IN HOPE**

**Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton**

**October 29, 2006**

Scripture: Psalm 65; Romans 12: 9-21

The news this week has been discouraging. Politicians wrangling. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq dragging on. Korea has the bomb now, and Iran is making plutonium. The carnage fills our television screens every night. There's genocide in Darfur, and tragedies in our own city, enough to make you want to stop reading the news altogether or watching it before bedtime for fear of nightmares.

Over against this disturbing picture of the world, Paul's encouragement to the fledgling church in Rome comes as a breath of fresh air, a new word spoken as a counterpoint to the despair of the world.

Rejoice in hope, he says, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Paul was blending his eschatology with his ethics, in other words, he combined his hope for the future reign of Christ with his teachings about the way church folks should live in the present moment. In the midst of a hostile world they attempted to create a church of welcome and tolerance, of diversity and difference, Jews and Gentiles together, and it was not easy.

They were at odds at times, theologically and culturally very different from one another. But Paul thought it possible to create a community of hope, a fellowship of encouragement counter to the divisions of the culture in which it existed.

This remains the work of the church today... our church, every church... to blend our hope for the future reign of Christ which is on its way, with the way we live today in this real world of discouragements and disagreements, differences and diversity, and claiming, instead, our unity in Christ Jesus.

"Rejoice in hope," Paul said, and ever since, in the church, we have been trying to do so by living out a counter cultural witness, rejoicing in hope when the world is close to despair.

Heather Mee tells the story about that windy day, a week ago Friday, when she was delivering the large sandwich board poster that is out on Fifth Avenue today, the one that carries the message of this year's stewardship emphasis, "Rejoice in Hope." It was the kind of sign that a New Yorker cartoon prophet would wear in Times Square, the kind that says "Repent," or "Doom."

But Heather small as she is was walking down the street near Grand Central, hanging on for dear life to this poster that the wind was taking with it. She said she held her hands above her head, and the board swayed back and forth in the wind, admonishing

all the dour lunchtime crowd on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street to “Rejoice in hope.” It was one of those *Metropolitan Diary* kind of moments.

That’s what we do in the church. rejoice in hope. While the world lives in fear, worries and frets about all that is discouraging, we rejoice in hope.

The source of our hope is Jesus Christ who is our touchstone to God, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He showed us a better way to live as God’s people, he who overcame death and so overcame the world. He is the source of our rejoicing and the reason that we have hope in this life. He gives us confidence that our God is still the God of heaven and earth and that he will go as far as love can go to provide us all that we need and even more.

That message of hope is something we nurture and sustain in the church, particularly in this wonderful old church, where our lives come together so gracefully in Christ. On any given Sunday the sanctuary fills with an amazing array of people that only God could have brought together, worshipping here, huddling together in the midst of these old stones, and by the grace of God finding that it works somehow. It works, of course, because it is God’s doing and not ours.

Would any of us have imagined putting all of us together this way? There is the young couple in their early thirties with a toddler who are here for the Sunday School and for this time that they can spend together each week. They are here to make sure that their daughter is exposed to good values and religious beliefs. And they are here also because they want a strong marriage and friends that they can count on, and they figure that they are more likely to make friends like that here than just about anywhere else in the city.

At the same time there is the young gay couple in a committed relationship, who are raising a child too. And they want the same things that the other couple wants. They want their son to be exposed to good values and strong beliefs. And they want to meet friends that they can count on with strong values and deep faith and figure that they are more likely to do so here than just about anywhere else in the city.

I look out and see a congregation every week that is becoming more and more diverse, like our city is becoming more and more diverse, and our nation too. Black and White and Asian and Hispanic people, immigrants and native born, younger and older people, couples who are Buddhist and Christian, Jewish and Christian, Muslim and Christian, others who are just trying to figure out what their faith is and who find here a house of worship and a place of prayer that draws them together in a way that they can’t find in the same way anywhere else.

*Rejoice in hope*, Paul said, and the way I see it, in this old church, we do.

I sometimes wonder what this city and this community would be like if First Church were not holding down this corner of Fifth Avenue and Twelfth Street in Greenwich Village. If there were, say, an apartment building here instead, with a Starbucks on one corner, and a branch of Citibank on the other. What would the seventy five or so seniors who come here every day for a hot lunch and to spend some time with friends and sing and have exercise classes and celebrate one another’s birthdays, what would their life be like if this church weren’t here?

And what would the 50 or so autistic children who attend school here every day do if they did not have an opportunity to learn in the comfortable, homey atmosphere of First Church, where they feel safe and protected and cared for and happy? What, for that matter, would the 90 or so kids in our Nursery School do if they didn't come here to learn their alphabet and to sing and draw pictures and hear stories, and get an early start on their education?

And the kids that come for the after-school program, whose parents are still working at that hour, what would they do if there were no educational enrichment program to help them learn?

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There is so much that we do for the good; educate children, serve meals to people living with AIDS and their caregivers, support a ministry to incarcerated offenders and ex-offenders through Church of Gethsemane, provide meeting space to five Twelve Step Groups, house ten men every night in the winter months on cots in the parlor, provide a sanctuary of respite and peace at noontime for people to come in from the workplaces and businesses of this neighborhood and pray and keep silence and restore their soul as they garner the strength they need for the living of these days.

Saturday, yesterday, the neighborhood came into the building for the annual fall health fair. They got free flu shots and blood pressure screening, glaucoma testing, information on mammograms and testicular cancer and child fingerprinting.

Later this afternoon, Edee Fenimore and Kellie Picallo will be leading the second of four conversations about grief and faith supporting a small group of those who have known the loss of loved ones recently.

*Rejoice in hope*, Paul said to the Romans, and the way I see it, in this old church, we do.

I'm bragging on you, because this is a church that embodies the hope that is at the heart of the Christian faith. Your unqualified welcome of every soul that is seeking after God, your ministry to the community, your educational outreach, your expanding service to others, your growing sense of community and building fellowship is an inspiration to me. It keeps me going to see that there is a community that really does embody Christ's message of hope and reconciliation.

Now if only you were all rich, and generous, there is no end to what we could do as a church!

The fact of the matter is that most of you are not rich. This is not a congregation in which there is inherited wealth. We may look like a Mercedes crowd from the outside, but let me assure you that we run things with a Chevy engine.

Like most New Yorkers, almost all of us live on current income, and we see our money go as quickly as it arrives.

We are a young congregation, and most of you are paying a lot for mortgages or rent and you have kids to think about, and high tuitions for nursery school and private school, and there's saving for college, and there's the rental for the summer or the getaway place upstate, and taxes to pay, and pretty soon it's all gone. Or if you are older

and living on a fixed income, you watch your income closely. One of you has told me that excluding social security you are able to live on only \$17,000 a year. And I am wondering how in the world you do it.

Money is one of the most worrisome things in our lives. We all think about it, and it's ironic that we never feel we have enough of it to really feel secure. The more you have, the more you think you need.

It's said that fully one fifth of all Jesus' sayings have to do with money. Not having enough of it, having too much of it, what it can buy, and what it can't. Jesus himself may have traveled as he advised his disciples to do, with "no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or extra tunics, or sandals..." but he still understood the worry we all have about money.

Some of our most familiar stories and teachings about Jesus have to do with worldly possessions. The story of the rich young ruler, for instance who went away sorrowful when Jesus challenged him to give what he had to the poor, and follow him. And the story of the widow's mite, the woman who gave all that she had, which even though it was only a few pennies was worth so much because it represented such a large proportion of what she possessed. And isn't it interesting that in the story of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, the exact amount of his bribe is remembered, 30 pieces of silver, as the price of betrayal. No wonder Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and money." How easily money crowds out what is really most important to us.

Every year we get to stewardship season, and the message is about the same. The church needs your support, yes. But more importantly, God has been generous and good to each of us, and so we are asked to respond out of thankfulness for all that we have received with a portion of what we have been given. How much? The Biblical tithe is 10% of household income. Not many people are giving at that level. I know that because if we were all giving 10%, based on median income for this neighborhood in the city, the church would receive several times what it does from pledged income this year.

No one can tell you what to give. But if you are thinking of your church pledge as a once a year gift in the same category that you give to your college or the AIDS Walk or the cancer society, or the heart fund, then we need to talk. You have not yet really taken seriously the spiritual priority that giving thanks to God represents.

The church is my number one giving priority. I tithe my income to charitable causes, though not all of it goes to the church, but the majority of it does.

If you are not yet giving a proportion of your annual household income to God's work, then I want to challenge you today to start moving in that direction now. If you are giving one percent of your household income, will you consider moving up to two percent of your income? If you are giving two percent, will you consider giving three percent?

If your income is over \$200,000 a year, will you consider giving a greater amount than four percent of household income?

The consumer world judges our worth by what we have, our possessions and holdings, the size of our home, the things we possess, the property we own, the size of our portfolio, our job title.

God values us by a different measure altogether. We are the apple of God's eye, and there is nothing that is good for us that God would withhold.

So God sees not what we have, but who we are inside. Before God we are of inestimable worth. God knows us through and through and loves us still and all. There is nothing God would hold back from us.

Considering that everything comes to us from God's abundance and love, and that God would withhold nothing from us that is good, the real question for us to ponder is not what are we giving, but what are we keeping, and why?

Most of us don't really believe that we have enough. In truth we believe the old adage that he who dies with the most toys, wins. And a lot of what motivates this town that we love is precisely that acquisitive impulse to try to acquire as much as possible and keep it with us before the music stops, God help us.

Our secret suspicion is that there is not enough to go around. Not enough money, not enough time, not enough food, not enough sex, not enough of whatever we most want. And so we try to keep, and collect, and amass, and hoard everything we can. We lead a life holding onto everything. The problem being, that when you grasp like that, you can never open your hand to place it in another's.

In spite of our doubts about it, our God is a God of abundance, from that first Garden in Eden where everything we needed was supplied, to the wilderness where God showered manna very morning, to the feeding of the five thousand in the wilderness of the Jordan valley, the story of God is the story of one who provides all that we need and even more. The decision to share what we have in support of the church and in thankfulness to God is finally not to an economic decision but a theological one. The question of whether we believe what scriptures tell us, that God is a God of abundance who will supply our needs, or whether instead we believe what the world wants to tell us, that everything is running out and we better grab all we can while we can.

I can't decide for you the amount you should pledge for support of God's work, I can only put before you the heart of the issue and ask you to choose, scarcity or abundance, fear or generosity, and which you believe is right: the world's conviction that everything is running out, or God's commitment to provide all that we need and even more.

As for me, as much as I am able, I am going to rejoice in hope, persevere in prayer, contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers, and overcome evil with good.

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