

Trinity Sunday

In one of the musicals called “South Pacific” there is a song which goes like this:

When the skies are brighter canary yellow
I forget every cloud I have ever seen,
So they called me a cockeyed optimist
Immature and incurably green.
I have heard people rant and rave and bellow
That we are done and we might as well be dead,
But I am only a cockeyed optimist
And I cannot get it into my head.
I hear the human race
Is falling on its face
And has not very far to go,
But every whippoorwill
Is selling me a bill,
And telling me it just is not so.
I could say life is just a bowl of jello
And appear more intelligent and smart,
But I am stuck like a dope
With a thing called hope,
And I cannot get it out of my heart!
Not this heart...

It is a happy little song, but it does not say anything very definitive about hope. Yet that is about as far as much of our thinking on the subject goes. In the minds of many, hope is little more than a sunny disposition, a shallow optimism, a basic inclination to look on the bright side. And I enjoy optimistic people. But I submit to you that in a world like this and in days like these, if we are going to have real hope, we must find some more substantial way of getting at it.

In search of that objective, I call your attention to a brief but significant statement in our reading from Romans. There Paul revealed the secret of his own hopeful outlook on life. Here is what he wrote: “We know that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope.” Study that statement carefully and you will find in it something far different from shallow optimism which we so often associate with a hopeful outlook on life.

For one thing, it contradicts the notion that hope is dependent upon happy circumstances. With many perhaps most of us, there is a direct correlation between current events and our overall attitude toward life. When things are going well, we are hopeful and optimistic; but when things take a turn for the worse, we lose heart. Like in that song, “When the skies are brighter canary yellow,” we forget every cloud we have ever seen. But on the other hand, when the clouds roll in and the sky

grows dark, then we forget the bright and beautiful days and act as if the sun will never shine again.

This is a tragic way to live because it places us at the mercy of events totally beyond our control. Instead of acting upon life, we end up merely reacting to it.

Good times turn us into optimists, while bad times transform us into gloomy prophets of doom. But Paul's approach was something absolutely different. He found and fashioned his hope at the very place where we tend to lose ours in the midst of trouble. Listen once more to his statement: "We know that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope." In other words, Paul is saying that real and lasting hope has little to do with the condition of the world but has everything to do with the character of the individual. Let us try for a moment to follow his thinking. First he says, "Affliction produces endurance." That means that by facing up to trouble, a person build spiritual muscle that enables him to endure even more trouble. Next he says, "Endurance proven character." That statement makes solid sense. Character means very little until it have been tested and proven, and that testing comes in the midst of adversity. Finally Paul says, "Proven character makes for hope." The man who has endured comes to know that he can endure; thereby building a proven character that enables him to face even desperate situations with hope.

So Paul was not cockeyed optimist. His hope was not happy little mood borrowed from favorable circumstances. It was a quality of character hammered out in the midst of trouble. He had stood the test of life before and therefore had a deep conviction that he could do it again. That kind of hope does not come and go with the changing winds of fortune. It holds steady in good times and bad, and will be there in those hours when we need it the most.

But if we stopped here and went no further, this presentation of Paul's confidence would be incomplete. It is true that he found his hope in the midst of trouble. But the question arises – what enables a man to do that? Why is it that trouble destroys some people while it makes others strong?

Well, Paul answers that question in the last sentence of our reading. “This hope,” he said, “does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” In other words, Paul's endurance was more than a matter of grinding his teeth and hanging on. It was rooted in some deep convictions about life. He believed that behind this universe is a God of love, revealed to us in Jesus Christ and always with us in the person of his Holy Spirit. When that kind of faith undergirds a man, something solid and unshakable sustains his hope. The world that belongs to a God of love can never be hopeless.

From somewhere, I remember an old story about a ship at sea, caught in the midst of a terrible storm. It lasted for several days and some passengers began to fear for their lives. Among them, however, was a little girl who seemed incredibly composed. She went about her childish routine almost as if nothing were wrong. Finally, someone asked, “How can you do that?” and someone else answered, “Her Father is the ship’s captain.”

The same is with us. This old world of ours can get pretty stormy; but if God of love is in control, we can be certain the ship will never sink. Then, like Paul “We even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope.” **Amen.**