

“Building up in love, holding on in hope”

August 9, 2009

Text: Ephesians 4:25-5:2, John 6:35, 41-51

I.

What I like about the 4th chapter of **Ephesians** is the constant emphasis on *building up*—building up one another in love, building up the **body of Christ** that is the Church. Being positive makes such a difference in our lives and—more than anything—it enables us to *hold on in hope*.

I wish they had a *good news* channel on TV; don't you? I'd sign up. I watch the news stations—MSNBC and CNN mostly—but they wear me out with negative stories and stories with an edge to them, an edge the news media create to sell their product ... anything to create enough controversy to draw us in.

It must be that *good news* doesn't sell, that it doesn't stir our interest. Still, *good news* stories and *good news* affirmations are invaluable for us in our every day lives. They *build up* our faith in our human situation ... and they encourage us to *hold on to hope*.

As Yvette and I were sitting in Reagan International Airport in our nation's capital last Tuesday waiting for a 4:45 p.m. flight back to South Florida, suddenly I noticed a news flash on the TV screen nearby:

North Korea pardons US journalists.

Below, there was a reference to former President Bill Clinton's successful humanitarian mission to secure their freedom.

II.

Although I haven't been following the plight of **Laura Ling and Euna Lee** that closely, I knew the basic details of their ordeal and, immediately, of course, I was delighted to hear the news.

Good news, anyone? I'll take some. Won't you? With all the violence, scandal, war, sickness, and poverty, to say nothing of the endless contentiousness in the U.S. Congress and, now, the silliness of the embattled Town Hall debates on Health Care (some ugly things are going on out there). Over time, it just wears you down.

There are more than enough *good news* stories to report; it's a matter of the news media deciding to cover them. Again, *building up* is good.

- To begin with, it's abundantly biblical, as we see here in **Ephesians 4**.
- *Building up*, looking for the good, emphasizing the positive ... make such a difference in the way we embrace the challenges of our daily living. And perhaps more than anything, they enable us to *hold on to hope*.

When I saw **Laura Ling** and **Euna Lee** walk off the plane Wednesday morning in Burbank, California into the arms of their notably joyous families, it was one of those *chills down the spine* GOOD NEWS moments, particularly when Euna Lee bent down to hug and embrace her little four year-old daughter, Hana, who hadn't seen her other for almost five months.

Wow! Imagine the feelings and the passion, bursting to be released. And to think, a day and a half ago, the journalists were still in their North Korea confinement, having been sentenced to 12 years hard labor. Their futures were still uncertain, as the months apart from their families marched on with chilling trepidation.

But now, in a sweeping moment of *who-knows-what behind-the-scenes negotiations*, they were free and reunited with their families.

Good news builds up; and building-up makes things better. It gives us hope and encouragement for the day and the week that are before us.

III.

Ephesians' overarching purpose is to paint a picture of the Christian life that leads people to make good decisions—decisions that promote UNITY. That's Ephesians' bottom line.

We have to remember that these were the first Christian churches and in order for them to survive there was a certain threshold of unity that had to be sustained. Too much rancor and divisiveness could be irreversibly destructive. That's why **Ephesians** says,

*Let no evil come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for **building up** ... so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*

In other words, do good deeds ... and say good things—deeds and things that build up, that make things better, that encourage people to hold on to hope.

Hope is so critical to our lives, friends, because it's so easy to get down and discouraged.

- Over the economy and uncertainty about our employment. Will we be able to meet our monthly expenses? Will those of us who are unemployed be able to find work? What will our lives be like, financially, next month or six months from now.

- Or over health concerns—with ourselves, our spouses ... our children, our grandchildren. Will we have the coverage we need?
- Or with key relationships ... with all we have to deal with ... with our spouses, our children and our parents??

With all of these very real circumstances and situations, it's so important to hold on to hope. Well, that sounds good: *hold on to hope*. You'd expect to hear that from a Christian Minister. But where's the hope and what does it look like?

Fair enough! Friends, the hope is in the choices we make and in having a plan to implement those choices. It sounds so easy, but, *get this*:

- Every day is an opportunity for us to make good choices, about whatever.
- And, indeed, at the end of the day, we ARE the summation of the choices we make in life. Think about it; it's true.

Within its larger purpose of UNITY, **Ephesians** exhorts us to make good choices; do the right thing. Check it out:

1. *Put away all bitterness, says Ephesians, and wrath and anger and wrangling ... put away all malice ...*
2. *Be kind to one another ... tender-hearted ...forgiving, as God has forgiven you in Christ.*
3. *And lastly, be imitators of God ... and live in love ...*

Make these the choices you make everyday, says Ephesians. Well, we know that. The key is to *do it*, to focus on **making good choices**, again and again.

IV.

I know that many of us are working through some tough times—with the economy, personal and family matters, health concerns, and things at work ... whatever it is.

And often times, in the aftermath of tough times, we experience a whole range of feelings:

- We feel exhausted from stress and worry.
- Sometimes we feel guilty for things that happened, things that didn't work out.
- Often times, we're left with deep feelings of inadequacy or failure, blaming ourselves for one thing or another.
- Other times, we feel a deep sadness or depression.

And at times, along the way, feelings of low self-esteem creep into our spirit and psyche.

The truth is, friends, life is hard. All the time in our lives, things happen—things we don't anticipate; and we find ourselves going down roads we never thought we'd travel on.

1. A helpful thought during such times is to remember that we are loved, more than we can ever know—by God, family and friends.
2. And a second helpful thought is that the life we have tomorrow does not have to be determined by the events of yesterday.

In other words: we can change and our lives can change ...

But, again, the way to work through any challenge in our lives is by making good choices, day after day. So often in our lives, we under-estimate the power we have. The freedom we have to make good choices—everyday—is an expression of empowerment. There is empowerment in our choices ... and that empowerment builds up hope.

Building up hope and building up love, day after day, changes our lives. So, how do we do it? What's the plan?

The plan, very simply, is *one step at a time*. In the process, we may have days when we take a big step and countless other days when our steps are small. But, what's important is to keep on stepping, keep on moving. Over time, small steps become big progress.

V.

Motivational speaker, **Chris Gardner**, the author of a recent best seller, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, has another book out entitled, *Start Where You Are*. It's a good read. The book is formatted around 44 lessons. Lesson five is: *Baby steps count, too, as long as you go forward*.

In this lesson, he talks about his Uncle Joe, a man who turned his life around and was able to make something of himself. The key was Uncle Joe's decision, early on, to get out of his native Mississippi and to move north to Milwaukee where some of his family had already settled. For a black man, Mississippi back in the 40's was a bit too much.

Although penniless at the time, in order to accomplish his goal, Joe walked the entire way—one step at a time. As **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** commented, years later:

***You may not be able to see the entire staircase,
but it's important that you take that first step.***

As we might imagine, there were many tough days and discouraging moments—times when he wondered where he would sleep or eat. Nonetheless, one step at a time, day after day, Uncle Joe made it to Milwaukee where he eventually made a life for himself. Again, the KEY: Keep moving forward, baby steps and all.

When we have the sense in our lives, and in our nation, that we're moving forward, it builds up hope.

- As the economy gradually begins to recover and rebuild, as many suggest is already happening.
- And when we're at last able to pass acceptable Health Care reform, we'll have the sense as a nation that we're moving forward, that we're on an upward swing. It will happen; but, of course, at times it can seem so agonizingly slow.

Building up one another in love/ holding on in hope! That's the life to which God calls us, friends.

VI.

It's interesting that one of the comments **Laura Ling** made at her brief media session, soon after deplaning, when she was thanking everybody, was how she and **Euna Lee** could feel the energy of love and concern for them ... all the way over in Korea. She emphasized this very strongly.

They could *feel* the love ... and of course, that fed the hope.

Building up in love/ holding on in hope. That's what our lives are about as Christians, and it's what **Ephesians** calls us to: *be imitators of God ... and live in love.*

And when we do, hope builds up in our spirit and we're reminded, again, that God's purposes will never take us ...

- where the grace of God cannot pour over us ... and where the love of God cannot surround us.

God's purposes will never take us ...

- where the mercies of God cannot sustain us ... and where the spirit of God cannot encourage us.

God's purposes will never take us ...

- where the peace of God cannot calm our fears ... and where the power of God cannot rescue and save us.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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