

“The audacity of hope”

February 11, 2007

Text: *Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-26*

I.

Are we on the edge of a new era—both in the wider world and here at home? A new era of broader coalitions of understanding and purpose? An era that demands more of us in both mind and spirit?

At last, are we coming to understand that we have to figure out to make our common life on this earth work. With new consensus on global warming and the almost universal condemnation of the war in Iraq, are we on the edge—finally—of figuring some things out?

Are we realizing that God doesn't have a back-up plan for the salvation of the planet? That we're it. Whoa! That's an awe-inspiring, burdensome realization, isn't it?

Are we on the edge of moving beyond the tempest of the *culture wars* of recent decades, beyond the polarization of America into ...

- Red states and blue states ...
- Religious right and religious *everybody else* ...the *saved* and the *lost* ...
- Conservatives and liberals ... tax cut advocates and tax cut opponents ...

Are we on the edge of a new acceptance of our differences ... guided by a new awareness that, hey, we may be different (in all kinds of ways), but we're still Americans? In fact, we're North Americans, South Americans; we're Europeans, Asians, Africans and on and on. Bottom line: we gotta make life on this planet work.

Are we on the edge of something new? I think we just might be. Thus, the sermon title this morning which comes directly from **Senator Barack Obama's** recent best selling book (number five on the best seller's list, the last time I checked) by the same name, **The Audacity of Hope.**

Senator Obama, in turn, came upon the title recalling a phrase in a sermon he'd heard in his *United Church of Christ* home church in Chicago, Illinois, by his pastor, *Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.* *The audacity of hope* overflows with Christian energy and purpose. As Christians—always—we are a people of hope.

II.

We've been going through some difficult times this past month in our church. A number of us have lost cherished loved ones. Others among us have health and financial issues we're working through. And yet, through it all, we find strength in the nurture and

support we offer one another ... and in the love God gives us in Jesus Christ.

It's a love, friends, that never ends. And because it never ends, it gives us the *audacity* to be a people of hope. To have *audacity* is to be willing to take risks, to be bold.

In Christ, we are called to live our lives ... with hope in our hearts and with hope on our lips. That's not always easy because at times we get down. At times, there's a darkness that comes upon us that chills our spirit. But then, the morning comes and on eagles' wings hope comes as well.

It's amazing, but it's true. Why?

Because it's the essence of who we are as Christians. *We are* people of hope. God is always calling us to something more. Do you believe that? I do, because it's true. God is always calling us to some new awareness, some new realization and understanding, some new forgiveness and new sense of inner peace.

This is not to be naïve and pollyannish about our faith; it is to be hopeful. Hopeful that our lives can be redeemed and transformed; hopeful that we can be born again; born to a new sense of love, a new sense of forgiveness and renewal that love brings.

This is the community into which Jesus calls us. Always, it's a community that is being redeemed and changed.

Which is to say: we are NOT locked in to whatever situations of deprivation or failure or sadness we might be feeling at the moment. While our feelings are real and concern us deeply, this does NOT mean that *whatever* we are dealing with today is somehow our inevitable future.

Never think, therefore, that your life can't change. Be brave! Be bold! Let **the audacity of hope** live in your spirit.

III.

The KEY is to seek God's presence in all things ... to all the time be living our lives in ways that move us closer to God.

How do we do that? How do we move closer to God? How do we move closer to living out God's purposes for our lives??

Whatever it is, it has to do with LOVE and forgiveness, with kindness and compassion ... and with seeing the BIG PICTURE in all that we do. The BIG PICTURE of our marriage, our family, our community, our nation, our world.

All the time the BIG PICTURE beckons. *Be big*, God says. Have a *big* spirit, a *big* love and a *big* forgiveness. The *blesseds* and *woes* of Jesus' sermon in Luke nudge us in this direction.

IV.

The *beatitudes* are universal because they speak to the deprivations of us all. We've all known some destitution or deprivation, some hurt, some pain, some deep running disappointment ... whatever it is. This is our human situation.

In our relationships ... with health problems ... with the grief that has perhaps come our way ... with our anxieties and fears ... with our depression ...

The point of the *beatitudes* of Matthew and of Luke's four *blesseds* this morning is they are an open door to a deepening of faith ... and therefore to the birth of a hope that rises up in our spirit.

In a sense, what Luke's *blessings and woes* are about is an awakening from within to the BIG PICTURE of our lives. And no matter who we are, we can relate. These teachings, friends, are some of the best of Jesus. In *Matthew*, they're the prelude to the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5 through 7).

And so, CHECK IT OUT, friends!

Blessed are you who are poor ... for yours is the kingdom of God.

Bless are you who are hungry now ... for you will be hungry.

Blessed are you who weep now ... for you will laugh.

And blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you, revile you, and defame you on my account ...

What all of these life-situations have in common is that they are conditions of deprivation or vulnerability that invite in us a deeper experience of God.

- When we're *poor* and *hungry*;
- when our lives are overcome with *sorrow* or when other people *hate us and put us down* ... we become increasingly aware that we need God.
- We need something outside ourselves to heal us or make us whole.

And it is then, out of our deprivation (out of our being vulnerable), that hope rises up in our spirit. Hope that says: things can get better.

And the way things get better is when each one of us begins to take a fresh look at the BIG PICTURE of our lives.

1. What does my marriage need from me?

2. What does my family need from me?
3. What does me community, country, the planet need from me?

These are the questions we need to be asking ourselves, on every level. And there's an *audacious* hope lying beneath the courage to ask these sorts of questions.

V.

The *woes* of Luke convey the same message, but from the other side. The word *woe* is a powerful word in the Bible. Old Testament scholar (and United Church or Christ minister), Walter Brueggemann used to say, *woe means: you're going to die*. Wow! That's serious! It gets our attention.

Woe to you who are rich ... or full ... or condescending ... or when everyone is loving you to death with compliments and accolades. Woe! Woe, indeed! For you're too full of yourself and you're, therefore, distancing yourself from God.

And so, friends, we live in times that require of us boldness of spirit and commitment, an audacity of hope. For we are on the edge of something new. Can you feel it? Can you sense it in the air? A new awareness, a new sense of purpose? It's happening ...

No matter where you are today ... no matter what you are going through, stay close to God and pray for the presence of the Spirit in all things.

VI.

I love the prayer of **Ephesians 3**:

May God grant that you be strengthened in your inner being ... with power through his spirit ... and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend ... and to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

When we're filled with all the fullness of God, we're filled with an *audacity of hope* and there's a robust boldness in our spirit. In hope, there is no darkness that can take over our spirit. There is no fear that can hold back our love.

Like a tree planted by water, said the prophet **Jeremiah** ... *sending its roots out to the stream*, we'll make it to the other side.

No matter what we're working through: in our marriage, with our children or parents, with the wrenching loss of a loved one, with health concerns or with our finances, whatever it is.

We'll make it because *love never ends* and because—in faith—the living Christ dwells in our hearts, filling us always ... and unmistakably ... with the *fullness of God*.

Friends, this is the audacity of our hope ... and our faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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