Sunday, January 27, 1991
DISCOVERING GOD'S SPIRITUAL GIFTS (No. 3 in a Series: The Gift of Hope)
Romans 5:1-5

Today, I am going to speak to you about Christian hope, one of God's most precious and needed spiritual gifts. St. Augustine said, "Hope was the best of the three virtues: faith only tells us that God is; love only tells us that God is good; but hope tells us that God will work God's will."

Do you remember how Charles Dickens began his classic novel, A Tale of Two Cities? It began, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Isn't that how many of us feel in these days?

Some of you have read M. Scott Peck's book, The Road Less Traveled. You may remember the first three-word sentence of that book: "Life is difficult." Peck then goes on to say: "This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult — once we truly understand it and accept it — then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters." That's where Christian hope begins.

Life is difficult, and the worst of times. So, where does the gift of "hope" fit in?

It has been said that there are always four dynamics that affect our present life: memory, change, conflict, and hope. In this sermon, I'm not going to talk about all four of these. I only mention them to underscore the fact that hope, when discovered as one of God's spiritual gifts, can do more for us in handling life's difficulties than anything else. People live on hope more than memory. Take away people's memories, and they become anxious; take away people's hopes, and they become terrified. Nobody can live without at least some hope. Hope is a permanent force in every human being, a driving power as long as each one of us lives. When we lose all hope, we die.

And if people cannot find hope in the present, they postpone their hopes down the road. In other words, we all look for hope first in the immediate future, and if we cannot find it there, we look for hope in the distant future, and if we cannot find it there, we look for it in the next life, in the far distant future, beyond the river.

In fact, people in some Christian circles seem to place all their hopes on a day when this world will come to an end, almost as if Christians are supposed to look forward to a huge holocaust in which God destroys the creation, or at least the earth. Such people then go on to teach that only they will be saved and everyone else is doomed. That's a lot of nonsense. One man has even written a best-seller about "The Late Great Planet Earth." That kind of talk is an insult to God. God loves the world so much that God sent Jesus to live among us.

The Christian hope that the Bible talks about is something quite different than this world coming to an end. We can see the roots of Christian hope in the Old Testament of the Bible, beginning with God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would be the parents of a large nation and that through this nation, the whole world would be blessed. Although they had no child in their old age when they received God's promise, a son was born to them, and their hope was fulfilled.

The people of the Old Testament continued to maintain their hope for Israel despite the many catastrophes of its history. Life was frequently difficult, but hope survived. Their hope grew as they received God's promise for the continued rebirth of the present world and for a new state of all things. This double hope, for the universe and for the individual, became the faith of the early Christians and is the foundation of our Christian hope still today.

But these hopes in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible had to struggle with continuous attacks of hopelessness, attacks against the faith that life has meaning and against the hope for life's fulfillment. Thus, there are in the Old Testament outcries of despair about life.

There is also a tremendous struggle about hope in the New Testament. It went on during the whole lifetime of Jesus, but it reached its height when, after his arrest, the disciples fled to Galilee. Hopelessly, they said to themselves, like the two in the beautiful story of the walk to Emmaus on Easter Sunday evening, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." They had hoped, but Jesus was crucified. In order to regain hope, they had, as it is said in 1 Peter, "to be born anew to a living hope" by the spiritual appearances of Jesus, which many of them experienced after Easter.

Later on, the early church had to fight with hopelessness because the expectations of Christians for the early return of Christ remained unfulfilled, year after year. Some became impatient and felt betrayed.

For a time, the early Christians learned to wait for the end, but slowly they ceased to wait. The tension of genuine waiting vanished, and they were satisfied with what they had. Their hope had to be redefined.

Then, as now, the critics of the Christian faith continued to ask, "How can Jesus be the Christ, the bringer of the new, if the world remains as it was?" It's still a troubling question. Children were asking in some of our Sunday School classes last week, "How can Jesus be the bringer of peace when there is war right now in that part of the world where he lived and died?" We have to admit that there are times when it is very difficult to have genuine hope.

And this brings us to our first point in discovering God's gift of hope in our lives. We only begin to discover this spiritual gift when we openly and honestly talk about and face our fears and despair with one another. Then we begin to create the conditions under which hope can grow. Hope is what is still there when all our worst fears have been realized and faced.

That's what M. Scott Peck was saying in the opening paragraph of his book, The Road Less Traveled. Once we truly know that life is difficult, then we can transcend it. Once we accept the fact that life is often difficult, then the fact that it is difficult no longer matters. We can move beyond it.

That's what the Apostle Paul is saying in his letter to the Romans. He begins by contradicting our prevalent impression that hope is dependent on hopeful circumstances. Yet that's a prevalent impression — that our hope is like a thermometer: things look hopeful, so we are hopeful; things look bad, so we lose hope. But Paul, at the very point where things look bad, begins his road to hope.

Listen again to part of what he said: “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”

Paul begins with suffering or trouble; from that, we build endurance; out of that, we build character, and from that, we discover God’s spiritual gift of hope. All of us know that we do not gain endurance from facing easy situations, but in adversity. It is through meeting adversity that we find endurance and build character and become the kind of people who confront even desperate situations with hope. Thus, the spiritual gift of hope is not a mood, caught from the favorable aspect of what’s going on around us, but a quality of character called out from within us when most needed.

Perhaps there is not much hope today among many people because of a misunderstanding of the nature of hope and its source. Hope is deeper than optimism. Popular moods in our country change like a weather vane, veering with every change in the wind — sometimes over-optimistic, then over-gloomy, “We’re in a recession!” “We’re in a recovery.” Daily, people listen to the news and then decide whether to be hopeful or not.

The daily stock market averages show this dramatically. Any even tiny upset in the political scene, or even the rumor of one, or a prediction of bad news or good news, can cause the market to plunge suddenly or rise suddenly. Christian hope is never based on a short-term view of things — it is based on God’s presence and promises, not on shifting circumstances.

Now let’s take a short detour here because you may be asking, “How can we distinguish genuine hope from foolish hope?”

Where there is genuine hope, that for which we hope already has some presence. What is hoped for is, at the same time, here and not here. It is not yet fulfilled, and it may remain unfulfilled. It is not a certainty, but there is some evidence that it could be.

Foolish hope is just the opposite. Here is a daydreamer who expects and hopes that someday, almost like magic, “his ship will come in,” as we like to say. But he has never sent a ship out. It’s like a person who hopes to make a lot of money in the stock market but never invests any. There is no basis at all for his hope.

But there are many things and events in which we can see a reason for genuine hope, namely, the seed-like presence of that which is hoped for. For example, in the seed of a tree, the stem, leaves, and fruit are already present, and this gives us the right to sow the seed in hope for the fruit. We have no absolute assurance that it will develop. But our hope is genuine. There is a presence, a beginning of what is hoped for.

And so it is with a child and our hope for her maturing; we hope because maturing has already begun, but we don’t know for sure how far it will go. We hope for the fulfillment of our work, often against hope, because it is already in us as a vision and driving force. We hope for a lasting love because we feel the power of this love already present. But it is hope, not certainty. These are all genuine hopes.

And this leads to the second main point about the gift of hope. As Christians, our hope is based on our faith that God is in ultimate control of creation and that, in the long run, in spite of setbacks, God’s will be done. There are seeds for this hope not only in the Bible but also in a study of history.

Some years ago, a student of Charles Beard, the historian, asked whether Beard might be able to put the lessons which he had learned over a lifetime of historical study into a few brief statements. After some thought, Charles Beard offered these four statements, and all are filled with hope:

The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.

Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad with power.

The bee fertilizes the flower it robs.

When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah showed the people of Israel what hope is all about. The enemy was at the gate of Jerusalem. The city was about to fall. The people were hungry and sick. Jeremiah himself was in jail. Yet, under these seemingly hopeless conditions, Jeremiah bought a field as a sign of his confidence that this people, this world, had a future under God.

Jeremiah could take this action because he believed this is God's creation and that, being so, it is never hopeless. The Gospel of John puts it plainly; not only is this God's world, but God so loved the world that God came and lived among us.

As Christians, we believe that God wants people willingly to do the divine will, but we also believe even more strongly that over the long stretch of history, God's will not only will be done but is being done, if not by us, then in spite of us.

Perhaps also it will help us to discover God's gift of hope if we realize that the goal of creation is not progress toward a final stage of perfection, but rather the creation of what is possible for humankind in each particular stage of history; and it is the struggle against the forces of evil, old ones and new ones, which arise in each period in a different way.

There have been and will continue to be victories as well as defeats in these struggles. But every victory, every particular progress from injustice to more justice, from suffering to more happiness, from hostility to more peace, from separation to more unity anywhere in this world is another glimpse of the reign of God at work in time and space. It is, in the language of the Bible, the continual coming of the reign of God among us.

For the reign of God does not come in one dramatic event sometime in the future. It is coming here and now in every act of love, in every manifestation of truth, in every moment of joy, in every experience of the holy. Our hope then is not in some final victory of God in the distant future, but in the here and now, whenever the Eternal appears in time and history.

You can discover God's spiritual gift of hope in your life. The first step is to openly and honestly face your fears and despair. Admit that life is often difficult. Then you are free to move beyond that stage, and hope will begin to grow.

The second step is to remember that as Christians, our hope is based on our faith that God is in ultimate control of creation and that, in the long run, in spite of setbacks, God's will will be done. We can help by discovering God's will for each one of us and living accordingly. Amen.