Sunday, May 28, 2000
HOPE DEFICIT DISORDER
John 15:9-17

About a year ago, I started a sermon series on “Deficit Disorders.” The first one in the series was “Vision Deficit Disorder,” and it wasn’t about the kind of vision disorder that can be corrected with contact lenses, eyeglasses, or even eye surgery. The second sermon in the series was “Faith Deficit Disorder,” the third, “Commitment Deficit Disorder,” the fourth came some time later on “Integrity Deficit Disorder,” and the fifth was on “Humility Deficit Disorder.”

Today, the series continues with “Hope Deficit Disorder.” I have another sermon in the planning stages called “Patience Deficit Disorder.”

The famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13 ends with the statement, “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.” I sometimes wish the writer had said, “and the greatest of these is hope,” because hope is the foundation of our faith. However, the point St. Paul is making is that faith, hope, and love are closely interrelated. You cannot have one without the other two. We’ll come back to that idea later.

Hope is one of the main themes in the life and teachings of Jesus. To have hope is to believe that tomorrow can be better than today and that you can help make it happen. In the scripture reading for today from the gospel of John, hope is the pillar that undergirds what Jesus said to his followers (paraphrasing), “If you love one another as I have loved you, the world is going to be a better place for everyone.” What could be more hopeful than that?

In this sermon, I am going to deal with two main questions: (1) What is hope as our faith defines it? and (2) What steps can you take to overcome “Hope Deficit Disorder?” This sermon is based on two assumptions: (1) that all of us are subject from time to time to Hope Deficit Disorder, and there are some of us who have a large case of Hope Deficit Disorder most of the time; and (2) that since God has created each one of us in God’s image, we are “wired” for hope from the moment of our birth, because God is a God of hope. So when you become a hopeful individual, you are becoming what God intended you to be.

What is hope according to our Christian faith? It’s more than mere optimism. It’s more than the vacuous “it will all work out” attitude we’ve come to associate (unfairly) with Eleanor Porter’s Pollyanna.

Being hopeful, according to the Christian faith, is a way of thinking about goals in your life. It is believing that God has given you and every human being built-in potential and free will so that you can set goals for yourself and find positive ways to reach them.

A psychologist at the University of Kansas, Rick Snyder, has developed a “Hope Scale,” which he claims is a more accurate predictor of college success than standard measures like the SAT, ACT, class standing, or grade point average.

It’s not that high-hope people are smarter — it’s the way their minds work. Present them with an obstacle, and they immediately start planning what they want to do about it and what path might prove most productive. They even think it’s fun to find new ways to solve a problem. People with hope think, “Here comes another failure,” and give up easily. They believe the

world is against them and want to keep their defenses in place. They think life is unfair, and there's nothing they or anyone else can do about it.

On the other hand, I've seen people who do not have Hope Deficit Disorder do amazing things. For example, hopeful people, when thrown in among strangers, behave as though they are surrounded by potential friends. It's no surprise that athletes who test on the high end of the Hope Scale outperform those who have Hope Deficit Disorder. High-hope individuals recover from illnesses with fewer problems and even tolerate pain better than those who have Hope Deficit Disorder.

What is the basis of hope? Christian hope is based on faith. To be more specific, it is based on the assumption that God has given each one of us creative possibilities, and that in certain ways, we are co-creators with God. Working with God, we can make the world better. Progress is possible and desirable. Christian hope is also based on the assumption that love is stronger than hate, non-violence is stronger than violence, good is stronger than evil, and we live in a creation where God cannot be eliminated.

Christian hope has its origin in the Old Testament and, of course, ultimately has its origin in God. Jesus grew up in the Hebrew tradition as remembered in the Old Testament. According to Thomas Cahill in his book, The Gifts of the Jews, ancient civilizations before the Jews saw life as part of an endless cycle of birth and death. Hope Deficit Disorder was common for all people. Time was perceived as a wheel, spinning ceaselessly, never altering its course. It was repetition over and over again — no change was possible. It was the faith of the ancient Jews and their faith in the one living God that changed that perception and gave rise to hope.

When Abraham and Sarah heard the call of God telling them to "go forth," the concept of an unknown future took hold, and Western civilization was born with hope as its basis. From this insight that God was calling them to go forward, the Jews evolved a new vision of men and women with unique destinies — a vision that thousands of years later Jesus expanded — all of it based on the belief that we are created in the image of God and that with our free will, we can help mold the future. Not only is change inevitable, but we can manage and direct the change. It is this vision that inspired the Declaration of Independence and our hopeful belief in progress. It is this vision that brought our ancestors to this country. It is this vision that is the foundation of all education.

Christianity, with its Hebrew heritage, unlike many earlier religions and philosophies, has a dynamic view of reality. It affirms that reality is dynamic and not static. Both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible bear witness to a God who can and does make all things new. The future is open, not fixed. It is this kind of faith that is the basis for our hope.

Now, to the second question: What are some steps you can take to overcome Hope Deficit Disorder in yourself and in others?

First, you can help very young children begin to develop their hope potential, which is a part of them from the time of their birth, and thereby prevent Hope Deficit Disorder. Hope is developed by building on success in working with one's immediate environment from early infancy on up. If, in these early childhood years, you have almost no success because of abuse, neglect, or the physical loss of a caring adult, you begin to acquire Hope Deficit Disorder. The important point is, hope can be taught and learned.

Cultivating hope works best when you also help other people reach their goals. It's not a self-centered activity. The most hopeful people are as interested in others' goals as in their own.

Overcoming Hope Deficit Disorder in your own life begins when you start paying attention to how you respond to change. Change is inevitable. How you respond is up to you.

There's a recently published little book with the title, Who Moved My Cheese? It's a simple parable that reveals profound truth about change. It's the story of four characters who live in a "Maze" and look for "Cheese" to nourish them and make them happy. "Cheese" is a metaphor for what you want in life — whether it's a good job, a loving relationship, health, or peace of mind. The "Maze" represents the organization in which you work, or the family or community in which you live — and all of them together.

In the story, the four characters are faced with unexpected change. Eventually, one of them deals with it successfully and writes what he has learned from his experience on the walls of the maze.

When you come to see the "Handwriting on the Wall," you can discover for yourself how to deal with change. Without ever using the word "hope," the story illustrates how important hope is in dealing with change. It also gives all sorts of suggestions for helping you to overcome Hope Deficit Disorder.

The four imaginary characters depicted in the story are two mice, "Sniff" and "Scurry," and two little-people, beings the size of mice who look and act a lot like people. Their names are "Hem" and "Haw."

Every day, the mice and the little-people spend time in the maze looking for their own special cheese. As the story progresses, all four of them, in their own way, find what they are looking for — their own unique kind of cheese. They have no idea where the cheese came from or who put it there. After a while, they begin to assume it will always be there, and that they deserve the cheese. Hem's and Haw's confidence grows into arrogance, and they don't even notice what is happening.

One day, when Sniff and Scurry arrive at the cheese station, there is no cheese there. Later that same day, when Hem and Haw arrive, they discover the same thing. Sniff and Scurry had noticed the supply of cheese had been getting smaller each day, so they were not surprised. But Hem and Haw had not been paying attention to the small changes, so they took it for granted that the cheese would always be there. I won't tell you the rest of the story here. You can read it for yourself.

The important point for this sermon on Hope Deficit Disorder is that these four characters are intended to represent the simple and complex parts of ourselves, regardless of our age, gender, race, or nationality. Sometimes we may act like Sniff, who sniffs out change early. At other times, we act like Scurry, who scurries into action. There are also those who act like Hem, who denies and resists change because he fears it will lead to something worse. Hem has a serious case of Hope Deficit Disorder. Sometimes we act like Haw, who learns to adapt in time when he sees that change leads to something better. To begin to overcome Hope Deficit Disorder, a lot can be learned from the characters in this story.

Thus far, I've noted that those who overcome Hope Deficit Disorder do so because of their faith in God, who has created each one of us in God's image, and thus hope is built into each

one of us. Our hope is also based on a faith that believes tomorrow can be better than today — that progress is possible, and that each one of us has an important role to fulfill in making the world better. So, when your cheese is moved, you are not surprised and start planning what you are going to do about it.

There's one more point to make in dealing successfully with Hope Deficit Disorder. The more you are connected with one or more other people in a healthy relationship, the more hopeful you will be. That's where love comes in. Jesus said, "If you keep my commandments and love one another as I have loved you, then my joy will be in you, and your joy will be complete." In other words, any Hope Deficit Disorder you have will begin to fade away.

The most hopeful people I know are those who have friends they can count on, and whose friends can count on them. As I said in a previous sermon, we now know that as we grow older, if we stay connected to others in loving relationships or friendships, we live longer and healthier lives. Lonely people are those who are most likely to be affected by Hope Deficit Disorder. There is a vast amount of new research that indicates that healthy social bonds are the most powerful predictor of a long, fulfilling life.

"Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three: and they are all connected to each other." Amen.