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, eye-glasses or even eye surgery. The second sermon in the series was "Faith Deficit Disorder," the third, "Commitment Deficit Disorder," the 4th some time later was on "Integrity Deficit Disorder," and the fifth, "Humility Deficit Disorder."

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

A frequently quoted passage from I 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 inter-related. 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 which undergirds what Jesus said to his

disciples. He told them and us, (and here I'm 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. (2) Since God has created each one of us in God's image, we are "wired" for hope from the moment of our birth, that

is the potential for becoming a hopeful person is built into each one of us 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, find positive ways to reach

them, and can find within yourself the motivation to use these pathways to reach your goals.

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 are such standard measures as the SAT or ACT or 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

deficit disorder look at the same obstacle and think, oh boy, here comes another failure. They give up easily. They think the world is against them and want to make sure to keep all their defenses in place. They believe that life is unfair and there's nothing you 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 automatically behave as though they are surrounded by potential friends. It's no surprise that athletes who test out 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 and that 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, that non-violence is stronger than violence, that good is stronger than evil and that we live in a creation where God cannot be eliminated.

What I am calling Christian hope has its origin in the Old Testament of the Bible and of course ultimately has its origin in God. Jesus grew up in that 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 came on the scene, saw life as being 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 possible. It was the faith of the ancient Jews and their faith in the one living God which 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 therefore 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 and

research. It is the hopeful belief that tomorrow can be better than today.

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 and not fixed. It is this kind of faith that is the basis for our hope.

Now the second question: what are some steps you can take to overcome hope deficit disorder in yourself and in others?

If you are a parent or guardian or teacher, 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 beginning from early infancy on up. And 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 other people's goals as they are 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 is a good job, a loving relationship, health or peace of mind. The "Maze"

is where you look for what you

you want--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 in 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 began to assume it would always be there and that they deserved the cheese. Hem's and Haw's confidence grows into the arrogance of

success. Soon they become so comfortable they don't even notice what is happening.

One day when Sniff and Scurry arrived at the cheese station, there was no cheese there and later that same day when Hem and Haw arrived at the cheese station they discovered 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 the 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 most of the time act like "Hem" who denies and resists change as he fears it will lead to something worse. Hem has a serious case of "Hope Deficit Disorder." Sometimes too we act like the fourth character, "Haw," who learns to adapt in time when he sees changing 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, and

again I'm paraphrasing, "If you 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 their friends can count on them. As I said in a previous sermon, we now know that as we grow older and if we stay connected to others in loving relationships or as friends, 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 most powerful predictor of a life

filled with hope. Good social relationships create hope.

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