

Hope

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A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas,
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Community of Christ A

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Karyn

In what do we put our hope?

Is it in things we can see and feel sure of?

I guess if that were true then it is not really hope at all but certainly a want that something will happen and in a particular way. Maybe even at a particular time; in which case the outcome is clear.

We might even feel we have control over it as we seek to push it along. This is not hope.

There's nothing wrong with it but it's not hope. This more fits into the category of being a plan, a strategy, to achieve a certain goal; something over which we may well have some control - in implementation as well as the final outcome: it will be our construction.

Hope, though, takes us a step further. Hope takes us to the edge of our sense of being in control to a point of faith.

"Faith in what?" might be the next question.

I knew a person who, for many years, had prayed the same prayer every day, agonising over every detail of the outcome that was very clear in their mind how it should be.

For years they prayed the same prayer. For years they agonised over the detail of how it should be answered. For years they lived in disappointment as the answer never came.

When I met them their spirit was low and they were eaten away by the anguish that accompanied their every waking moment, overtook them, and their body was tired due to restless nights unable to sleep and be at peace.

When they shared their prayer with me, I was not surprised at their anguish. For their prayer was one that wanted God to change some very specific people in very specific ways around them - to fit a model in which they personally would be comfortable.

"If only these people could see the way to changing" this person would say. "I try to do what God wants - I pray long and hard, I work hard, I deprive myself as a reminder that suffering is part of faith. Every day I suffer for God but God does not answer my prayer."

Of course, the focus of the prayer was to bring everyone into line with what made that person comfortable. At no time did they consider that they might also need to make some changes too.

The people being prayed for were family, they were not doing anything wrong, they were not unkind or thoughtless - they just didn't fit the mould that this person wanted them to. So life was uneasy.

We talked about this person's understanding of God - and yes, it was that God would provide all needed. God would make the paths smooth. God would care for the sheep and bring them to good pasture.

All of which was interpreted by this person as making life easy for them and forming everything for their comfort.

I have a feeling this person was not alone at all in their particular understanding of God and what it means to be in relationship with God.

Today's reading from Ezekiel reminds us that we are in a relationship with God; now that's a two-sided, not a one-sided relationship. It's not about the life God alone will make for the people but what God and God's people can make together.

The portion of letter to the Ephesians read today talks about Christ equipping us for our part in that relationship. What we can depend on is that God will equip us - but of course we need to be prepared to put our faith in and trust the equipper - trust in Christ to guide us as we live within that relationship: a relationship based on love - not just God's love for us which is beyond anything we can imagine - but our love for God, the Great Spirit of all Life, and all that this means.

Hope, Faith, Love, Trust and yes Peace all work together.

Let me introduce you to Jake Brown, a member of the Pitt Street Uniting Church community as he shares some of his thoughts on hope.

Jake

Hope is essential for mental health.

In my psychology practice, people who lose any sense of hope find it hard to be energised to challenge their self-destructive patterns, often established in the past. Australia has been ravaged by fire, flood, extreme weather, and of course by Covid19.

I think we are all humbled by the moving examples of those confronting these issues, when we regularly see the evidence of hope as they become energised to confront death, disease, loss of property, ravaged crops and farm animals, and loss of any means of support. The evidence of continued hope is shown through their resilience, an example to us all.

Upon reflection of hope in my own life, I thought of the ease with which I am able to hope. It is like a gift which was easy for me to access, and I reflected upon the reasons for this:

- I grew up as a man with an assumed heterosexuality that quite easily secured a sense of entitlement, agency, and power. Both masculinity and heterosexuality are dominant discourses, with those possessing them frequently more easily able to thrive than those on the subordinate positions of these two areas of diversity - of gender and sexuality. Thus, two of the eight current diversity areas (the others being mental and physical health, age, religion, race, ethnicity, and social class) were supportive of my early life, establishing a sense of competence and hope.
- Although I came from a poor family, I grew up in a white community in a country where education was easily accessed through the Queen Elizabeth Loan and Scholarship fund available to most who wanted to go to university.
- Looking back, I obviously found the assumed heterosexuality probably the most difficult discourse to challenge, as it came with such privilege, particularly during the 1960-1980s!

It is easy to underestimate the effect of the environment and the dominant discourses of the day in shaping my early thinking. Certainly at a young age, it is easy to simply follow the prevalent ideas which are subtly linked to privilege and power. However, I also had some good models of hope demonstrated by my parents.

- I grew up with a strong mother, who was often the main bread winner of the family, and thus in a position of power in the family, providing her with a sense of agency and confidence, even though the job was a menial one that required no specific qualifications. Consequently, I was made aware of how traditional male power could be challenged, even if I had no language for that in the 1960s.
- My father was also full of hope, in spite of the fact that he had many temporary labouring jobs that were not fulfilling. He was an intelligent man, who was limited by a poor education. Even in the face of adversity and poverty, he continued to maintain a sense of hope, often fuelled by his ideas about Christianity, linked to a literal interpretation of the bible. He grew up with a father who had seen his mother dominated and controlled, and had decided that he did not want to do that to his wife. And he didn't!

He continued to be optimistic and hopeful throughout his life. In his 80s he had to have a leg amputated and he adjusted well to this disability. When out walking one day he fell down and his leg came off. He simply put it back on, got up from the ground somehow, and continued walking.

At 90, a few days before he died, my sister visited him in the hospital and he was singing to himself as he told her: "*I find singing helpful to cheer me up when I feel a bit down*". There were lots of examples of resilience, fostering a sense of hope. Thus the gift of hope was stimulated by many experiences from my family.

The gospel reading in Matthew is also full of hope, even if it appears to be misdirected at times! In reading a few commentaries online, I noted there was a lot of controversy with this Matthew passage.

Some saw it as a parable and others as a comment on what sort of judgment was awaiting all of us. I found a search for the deeper meaning of a parable somewhat more intriguing, linking it to a number of sources. The story of judgement immediately caused me to think about a book written by Louis Evely, called *That Man is You*.

In the book he describes a play depicting the last judgment. The good are gathered, assured of their position in heaven, but a rumour begins to be circulated: "*it seems he's going to forgive those others*", inferring those who hadn't focussed on this final day judgment. As the rumour builds, the good are roused to the point where they say "*we can't accept a God who forgives everyone so freely*". And thus they judge themselves. The good were hopeful, but it seems they were more hopeful about ensuring their own security, fostering self-satisfaction and entitlement, rather than worrying about others, accounting for their final resolution.

And of course, who can forget the wonderful C. S. Lewis book called *The Great Divorce*?

In this allegorical narrative he describes those who ended up in hell, who were offered bus tours across the great divide to heaven. A spirit served as a tour guide on the trip. Of course when they arrived in heaven, they found it too real and a difficult place to get used to. The grass pierced their feet and the water was too hard to dip hands into, but as the spirit pointed out, if they decided to stay in heaven, they could get used to this by toughening up; thus gradually developing a body that could cause the grass to bend underfoot, and water that would yield to the touch. However, many returned to hell, because it was more comfortable without having to endure the inconvenience of change required to stay in heaven.

Various people on the bus described the reason for their journey. One woman told the spirit that she was perplexed that her husband had made it to heaven, while she hadn't! She had made a real man out of him by insisting he apply for promotions and work for long hours, even though he simply wanted to sit down more and have a relaxing life. However, she conceded that she would find him in heaven and take charge once again as he "*needed a firm hand*". C. S. Lewis comments about the woman: "*she lived for others; you could tell the others by the hunted look in their eyes.*"

Thus, the ideas of hope here related to changing others to meet your own needs as well as the idea that seems to infer that this may be a way of creating your own hell right here on earth!

In both of these scenarios, the stories of the hopeful had focussed on the future and were disappointed, which brings us back to the gospel reading. Commentaries on this passage, point out that both groups are surprised with the judgment, as is the case with many of the parables in Matthew. The two groups can roughly be divided into "Future Focussed" and "Present Focussed".

1. The Future Focussed are the ones who thought they had followed all the precepts that they should, and were suddenly judged as not recognizing the Christ in those around them, who they apparently ignored. They were hopeful of a future that provided a kingdom that was perfect, and were waiting for the kingdom of heaven to emerge. Apparently, this "truth" absolved them of any particular efforts on earth, apart from working towards their future goal.

2. The Present Focussed are the ones who don't appear to have thought much about hope at all. Thus, they were not looking for a future place where all of the problems on earth would be solved. However, I wonder if they had hope to carry on in the face of adversity, by trying to create a world where they worked towards justice and peace. They may have had links to churches and faith, but possibly simply lived their lives with a sense of what could be accomplished to make life better or perhaps more hopeful probably for themselves as well as others. Linking their behaviour to future reward in heaven apparently hadn't occurred to them. Perhaps they were practicing the kingdom of heaven, without even being aware of it!

So how do these ideas challenge me? It seems that focussing on hope in a future kingdom of heaven is at odds with actually engaging with issues of justice and peace here on earth. Thus, there is an implication that we should perhaps use our hope to create this kingdom here on earth. Yet, hope in the face of innumerable problems here on earth can make hope an exhausting process.

It's tempting to hope for a future kingdom of heaven rather than to use our hope to create that here on earth. Being in a church that emphasises and practices social justice can create a sense of complacency, as it's easy to see the efforts that are being made towards this end, and leaves little room for any further effort.

As the gift of hope comes easily for me, maybe my task is about creating more hope in others, particularly those who are marginalized by society. We often socialize with people who have similar views to us, and thus are rarely challenged to stand up for the oppressed. Yet at times, I find others will make particularly racist or anti-immigration comments, and the challenge I find may be as simple as respectfully disagreeing with these comments, not to try to convince them, but simply to let them know that there are alternate views.

As a professional, I know that successfully changing other peoples' attitudes doesn't happen easily. However, to let them know that their views are not the only ones, may possibly even cause them to rethink their position privately, and to think more carefully before making such comments again. Attitudinal change is often begun with simple behaviour change.

Thus, change can come in little ways as we create hope in others. These are things we are all easily able to do, which I'm sure we can identify without much effort. Simple things like being encouraging to those who serve the public, be it online or in person, where these workers are required to say the same things to people again and again each day as well as experiencing the wrath and frustration of those who are disappointed after waiting a long time for an unhelpful answer.

Also, it's easy these days to find those who are lonely and offer words or encouragement and hospitality, which is an issue that we have all become increasingly aware of during the time of pandemic.

I watched my father in our community invite ostracized people over for dinner, and even Christmas dinner on occasion! Looking back to my childhood, I wince at how I viewed these intrusions into our comfortable family celebrations, as they weren't easy people to be around. But I'm sure my father generated hope in the lives of these ostracized people.

As my father took a literal interpretation of the bible, he was less than pleased when I told him I was gay, shortly before he died at the age of 89. Following a brief discussion, where I was reminded of what the bible says about this "sin", I prepared to say good bye.

As I stood up, he also stood up, came up to me, looked me straight in the eyes, and said: “I don’t kiss very many men on the lips” and gave me a deliberate kiss, saying: “I love you”.

On reflection, that may be the only time in my life that I remember my father saying I love you to me directly. Thus, even though his “future focus” on the coming judgement was a dominant view, he was able to maintain a “present focus” by the tender moment of me saying goodbye, again creating a sense of hope in me.

I saw my mother, a kind woman, write letters to people who she hardly knew, empathising with them. In 1977 she met a friend of mine here in Australia when they visited me. When my friend’s mother died, she wrote her a letter. I only discovered this two weeks ago when my friend found the letter and shared it with me.

Perhaps the Matthew reading challenges us to live the kingdom of heaven rather than to wait for a future one - by giving the gift of hope where there is injustice, and distress in those who are less hopeful.

Karyn

Christian Hope - faith in something good beyond ourselves, not for our own sake but for the sake of God’s vision for us all.

I now introduce you to Suzanne Leal, again a member of the Pitt Street Uniting Church community.

Suzanne

Good morning. My name is Suzanne Leal and today I’m delighted to be part of Pitt Street and the Pitt Street service and to be talking about hope.

This is surely a year to be discussing hope. It’s been a year of much difficulty, of much unexpected misfortune for people. And I think, in order to get through, I’ve looked and I’ve seen people around me look, for hope and resilience during these difficult times.

For me, writing is my go-to when I need to make sense of what’s going on around me and when I need to find solace. So what I’d like to do is just read you a brief excerpt from my new novel which is a novel called *The Deceptions* which came out, as it happens, as Australia was going into lockdown in April.

It’s mostly the story of a woman called Hana who, during wartime Czechoslovakia, finds herself imprisoned in a ghetto called Theresienstadt. She’s a Jewish woman.

It’s also a story of Ruth, who is a Uniting Church Minister who is grappling both with her faith and the responsibilities she has to her congregation. She’s a terrific character, I think, who makes me think about the gifts that our ministers give to us and the difficulties in maintaining hope and resilience during difficult times. So I hope you enjoy this brief reading from my novel.

‘Two decades ago, God struck! And, brimming with energy, Ruth had been excited to give her father the news. She would follow in his footsteps, go to the theological college, become a Minister.

‘At the time of the revelation she had been 23. To her surprise he tried to talk her out of it! “It’s hard enough as a man”, he’d said, “but twice as hard for a woman”. Her father rarely made her bristle but she bristled at that one. Perhaps that’s what had finally convinced her. The challenge to do what he thought she couldn’t.

‘Later he tried to clarify. “I didn’t mean you couldn’t do it. I didn’t mean women in general can’t do it. It’s just there’s a lot of misrepresentation that goes along with the work. It’s supposed to be a job for one person, but it’s not a one-person job is it love? You know that. You grew up with it.

“It’s a one-family job, that’s what it is. The church gets two for the price of one. One minister and one minister’s wife. At least that’s how it worked in my time. There’s no way I could have done it alone.

“And yes, I’m all for women in the ministry love, but the thing is, so many are coming in single - and the married ones aren’t bringing a stay-at-home husband as well now, are they?

“They aren’t bringing someone who’ll head up the playgroup on a Friday morning, or sort out the morning tea roster, or pop in to check on whoever’s been ill and hasn’t made it to church for a while. The job’s just too much for one person, man or woman. But it’s only the women who are trying to do it alone.”

‘Twenty years later, she had to concede he’d been right; it was too much for one person. But if she was anything at all, Ruth Martin was a stayer. Besides, what was the choice? She’d been tapped. She’d been chosen. God had pulled her into the ministry. Who was she to try to take herself out again? Like it or not, she’d been called. And a calling wasn’t something to pick up and put down again. It was a responsibility. A responsibility to do something good. Something that mattered.

And now a brief excerpt which explains a little more about Ruth Martin’s father, also a minister, who’s now aging.

“After his retirement, the Reverend Harry Martin had become a student again. A doctoral student, graduating at 70. On Sundays he would drive the short distance to Yarrow where, sitting up the front, he became Ruth’s most avid parishioner. Every now and then Ruth would ask him to preach in her place. Nepotism perhaps, but Harry Martin had always been known as a preacher of merit.

“It is no accident her father had proclaimed on one such occasion that, in the Genesis story, the name of the first human Adam is closely related to the Hebrew word for earth: Adama. Humans were formed by God out of earth and are destined to return to it.

“In Genesis 2. 7 we read *“then the lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”*. Adam and Eve are earthlings in a very literal sense. They are creatures of earth into whom God has chosen to breathe the breath of life. By decrying the earth of which we are made, or remaining indifferent to it, we are denigrating our own physical being and the worth of a creature of God.

“His voice, never smug or rounded, stayed conversational as he spoke. From time to time on the east coast of Australia we suffer from dust storms, as tons of our top soil are blown into the ocean. This is the result of poor care, deforestation and excessive land clearing. In the Murray darling basin, salination is becoming a nightmare as thousands of hectares are little better than wasteland.

“The words were Armageddon-like, but delivered so calmly, with only a pause for effect. So, what can we do, he asked, his eyes on Ruth, and somehow on everyone else all at once. We can value our soil. The soil that forms so closely it's considered a non-renewable resource. And this is a message the government must heed. And we ourselves, in our own circumstances, can ensure that the vegetable waste we produce is fed back into the ecological cycle through our use of worm farms and composting. We can show that we're anxious to give back to the earth, rather than just to keep taking. And so we'll respect the rights of our children while following the bible's injunctions.

“For Ruth, it had been a master class in how to move from the biblical to the universal to the personal in a way that seemed obvious and yet effortless. And then, when within a year, nothing had been effortless anymore, her father's speech began to catch and his voice, so sure, became hesitant. And from the lectern he began to stutter. Sometimes he would have to stop, struggling to swallow in order to get through his sentence.

“And when, one day, she had asked if he would like to give a new sermon, a shadow had fallen and slowly he had shaken his head. Tell you what darling, he had said with only a bit of a smile, how about I write up a draft and give it to you instead. This old age thing, it's making public speaking tricky. “

So Reverend Harry Martin is his own creature. He's a fictional creature, but of course I took from him the lessons that I've learned from my father, Barry Leal, who was measured and calm - and who imbued me with a sense of hope and who has enabled me to keep alive his intellectual rigour as I try to work through issues and try to give hope and resilience by means of my writing.

Karyn

Hope within a relationship based on love can and does make the difference. It is filled with promise that, although things will not always be as we might personally find comfortable, we can trust in the vision for a world whole and well as we faithfully follow the Way provided.