

Three Sermons on Being Stewards  
III: Stewards of the Hope

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“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.” – Ephesians 1:17-19

As I often do when I sit down on a Friday morning to write Sunday’s sermon, I reached this past Friday for a volume of sermons from my old teacher, Peter Gomes, not for purposes of plagiarism, but rather for inspiration, the way a professional golfer might watch a video of Tiger Woods before heading out to try to perform their own best on the greens.

I took down the volume of Peter’s collected sermons published by William Morrow in 1998 because I knew that the second half of the book is devoted to themes rather than to the Sundays of the church year, which was Peter’s preferred way of preaching and which makes up the first half of the book.

I ran my finger down the table of contents and there they were, Peter’s favorite themes: happiness, identity, love, perfection, wisdom, stewardship – useful for Pledge Sunday, certainly, but not what I was looking for – and so on, through twenty-two different topics. But I was shocked to find not a single Gomes sermon devoted to the topic of hope. This struck me as very strange because Peter was a profoundly hopeful man and he often preached on hope. Hope is at the core of biblical thought – the word occurs over 130 times in the Bible – and it’s central to Christian living. Hope is something we all need right now, as much as we ever have and more than many of us realize. And since stewardship sermons are about meeting needs, I have taken hope as the topic of this year’s culminating stewardship sermon. Along with time and space, we Christians are called to be stewards of hope.

And not just any old hope. We followers of Jesus the crucified and risen Christ are called to be stewards of “the” hope – that’s not a typo in the title of my sermon – from among the many hopes available to us. Christian hope is very specific and very different from what we might call ordinary or secular or natural or generic hope. Christian hope is vocational hope – it’s the hope to which we are called. Christian hope does not spring up in us naturally, the way hope for a pretty day does, or the way hope for a young couple on their wedding day does, or the way hope for a new baby does.

No, the hope to which we are called as Christians is more specific than generic hope, and its source is transcendent rather than mundane. The hope I'm referring to is found in my text from the first chapter of Ephesians: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power" (vv. 17-19).

There are three divine gifts specified in that mouthful of words, and they are related: the hope to which we are called, the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, and the immeasurable power available to believers. Let's take a closer look, starting with hope.

Christians are called to hope, to the very specific hope of sharing in the glorious riches of the inheritance of the saints and the immeasurable greatness of the divine power available to believers. That power has been revealed to us, the writer of Ephesians says in the next verses, in Easter, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Easter is the foundation of Christian hope, and it is the spark that lights the fire of Christian power. If you are an Easter Christian – and it's hard for me to imagine any other kind – then you have Easter power. You have the power of a love so deep, so strong, and so determined that death itself cannot end it. That is both the message and the power of Easter – the immeasurable power of God put to work on our behalf.

What good news that is – God's power on our behalf! You and I do not have to do this – whatever "this" is – by ourselves. We are not limited to our own abilities. We are not alone. We have resources. We have allies. They're called saints in Ephesians, and saints are simply the believers who lived what they professed. They're the believers who steadfastly, gently, graciously, lovingly, and stubbornly refused to let the world entice, seduce, or bully them into betraying their beliefs. That's what the world does to most of us. It manages to drive an iron wedge in a velvet glove between what we profess and what we do, making us not the people we know we are called to be.

We Christians are particularly vulnerable to this type of seduction or intimidation because we mistake thought for belief. Every Sunday, all over the world, Christians stand up and recite in unison some sort of statement of belief – the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the UCC Statement of Faith – and those millions of sincere believers equate those strings of propositions with their beliefs. We've been doing this for over two millennia now, so we're quite good at it.

But people's actual beliefs don't lie in words; they're embedded in our actions. You and I know this to be true because we know what hypocrisy is. We know that a person's actions and a person's words must display a high degree of congruence over time if they are to have integrity and if we are to take them seriously. And a saint – a Christian saint, anyway – is nothing more than an ordinary person with a high degree of congruence over time between their words about God and the actions we see them live.

And some people – those who choose the narrow gate Jesus spoke of – have been displaying that kind of congruence for as long as religion has been around. There is a long, varied, and rich tradition of believers who, as Londoners might say, have "minded the gap" between their words about God and their lived behavior. Every generation has had its saints, those people who responded to the Spirit's call with stand-out fidelity and consistency. Their

names are well known: St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Anthony, St. Francis, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Teresa of Calcutta, Brother Lawrence, Mother Seton. Others haven't been officially canonized, but they, too, belong among the saints: Dorothy Day, the Dalai Lama, Dorothy Kazel, Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Jean Donovan, Martin Luther King. These people, remarkable as they appear to us, did nothing more than allow themselves to be used by that immeasurable power that raised Jesus from death – and that had parted the Red Sea, and that brings forth creation from chaos every single day. The power of Easter is the same immeasurable divine power that has been at work since the very beginning and will still be at work beyond the very end.

The hope to which Christians are called – the hope we are to steward – is the hope we have in that immeasurable power to save. It is a hope beyond the ordinary hopes of politics or economics or sociology or history. It's a hope beyond the hopes of the Great Society or Bread for the World or Open and Affirming or No Child Left Behind. It's a hope beyond the hopes of philosophers, theologians, artists, and poets. It's a hope beyond even the hopes we place in our nearest and dearest.

The hope to which we followers of the Lamb of God are called is found in that most hopeful and most misunderstood of all the Bible's books, the book of Revelation. On the rocky island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, John was granted a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, a vision so lovingly mysterious that neither logic nor symbolism can reach its deepest depths. Throughout that vision, the Lamb that was slain sits with God upon the throne of judgment, mercy, and finality. It is the Lamb who was slain for the sake of the world who ultimately rules that world and saves that world, a world made new not by our schemes or dreams, but rather by the will of a loving God.

John's vision is our vision, John's hope is our hope, and John's message is our message. The hope which we Christians are called to steward – to keep alive, to keep meaningful, to keep available for the world – is that hope that transcends the very world for whose sake that hope exists.

I cannot say to you too often that the hope we have to offer the world in our earthen vessels is not the hope of Republicans, Democrats, Independents, or Greens. It is not the hope of American exceptionalism or even democracy itself. The hope we offer and to which we cling is always in this world, but never of this world. It comes rather from that restless, creative, untamable Spirit that brought forth creation, that brought forth freedom from slavery, and brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ. To live in that Spirit is to live in hope, and to steward that hope – “the” hope, the only hope worth having – is the greatest stewardship there is.