

When Hope Is Hard to Find

Rev. Victoria Ingram

May 8, 2011

This week, I've been sick with a bad cold. On Wednesday, I had such a horrible headache that when our Board President, Tim Versteeg, called to talk about a bit of church business, I sadly announced to him that I was, I thought, dying of meningitis and probably wouldn't be at church today.

Tim, bless his heart, listened patiently, as only a father who has heard the pleas of his school-aged children to stay home can, and then gently informed me, that he was reasonably certain that I did not, in fact, have meningitis, was not going to die, and really should plan on getting today's sermon completed, just in case.

Then he stopped and said, "Wait a minute – you're the minister. Aren't you supposed to be the HOPEFUL one?"

Well, yeah, but it wasn't one of my better days, okay?

When times are good, hope is easy to find, to have, and to keep. You don't have to do much to have hope at those times. When things are bad, hope takes a lot more effort. You have to actually do something to keep your hope alive and present.

The words of our song this morning, "when hope is hard to find," really resonated with me when I thought about this morning's worship. We're living in a time when it seems that hope can be hard to find. It's not just the economy or the job market. We're surrounded by news of world-wide problems that I know concern us all deeply. There are people starving. There was an election this week. The US assassinated Osama bin Laden. Poverty, environmental degradation, war, sickness – they're a part of our lives, locally and globally, every day.

And, what impacts our ability to remain hopeful is that we can't really predict the outcomes of any of these situations. I'm not sure anyone – experts, politicians, or economists – can tell us what will happen in the future and when. As Studs Terkel said, the "big boys are not that bright." We can do things on our own human scale, but we can't save everyone. None of us can worry enough, fuss, fret, or fluster ourselves enough to truly make one whit of difference in any of these situations. Anxiety is simply not the answer.

Again, from Studs Terkel: "Hope has never trickled down. It has always spring up. That's what Jessie de la Cruz, a founding member of the United Farmworkers meant when she said, "I feel there's gonna be a change, but we're the ones gonna do it, not the government. With us, there's a saying, 'La esperanza muere ultima. Hope dies last.' You can't lose hope. If you lose hope, you lose everything."

(DEMONSTRATION: Take glass of water and drink half. Set it down so it is visible to the congregation.)

So, is the glass half empty or half full?

Genetic scientists have found links between optimism or pessimism and our genetic make-up, making us predisposed to see this glass as half full or half empty. Some of our reaction to the news around us is hard-wired into our brains. We seem to naturally have a bent for optimism or pessimism that influences how we then see the world.

But, I don't think that means we're doomed to a lifetime of only seeing the world as gray and gloomy or rosy-pink and happy. Because in addition to our natural

inclinations, each of us also carries around a set of stories in our marvelous brain – stories we tell ourselves about how the world works.

Our stories are based on our experience, and they are based on the stories held within the collective memory and experience of the people with whom we associate. Like each of us has a personal narrative, our family had a story. This church has a story, as well - a set of memories, truths, and experiences shared together because we are all a part of this place and this religious community.

When we experience anxiety, our reptilian brain – that part of ourselves that operates at the most basic level – causes us to react, rather than to respond from a place of resourcefulness and creativity. Our reactivity is related to replaying those internal stories, of reliving select experiences that reinforce our perspective on and interpretation of what’s happening to us in this moment.

When we’re living life from our reactive brain, we experience a sense of a lack control and influence. Alternatively, when we have a sense of being able to be creative and resourceful, we experience a sense of hopefulness and anxiety. Anxiety is about a state of being – a mood – but it’s also about the stories we tell ourselves because they can be a contributing factor in feeling anxious.

Hope allows us to believe that things can and will be different, that change is possible, perhaps even inevitable. Our creativity and resourcefulness open us up to the realms of possibility. Additionally, in a situation where there may be many things we cannot change, tapping into our creative self reminds us that there are also things we can do to influence aspects of how our life is unfolding in the moment. Ask yourself, “When I feel anxious, what story do I tell myself about why I can’t be hopeful?”

I think we can change our stories. I think we can consciously examine and work with the limiting beliefs and perspectives we carry around with us all the time, expanding them to allow ourselves alternatives in the way we see and interpret life, therefore influencing how anxious we might feel, how hopeless we perceive a situation to be.

From that reflection, we can take action and move ourselves to a new place, new options. You can’t help but feel more hopeful when you feel like you have choices. We can move ourselves into action, consciously initiating change in our own thoughts and actions, and engaging and participating in new, more productive ways. Human beings have possibilities, and all of us are better than we may be behaving in any given moment.

So, how do we change our stories to help ourselves create less anxiety and more hope in our lives? Changing our stories involves a process of three steps: Reviewing, Revising, and Recomposing.

Step one, reviewing, involves assessing what is – where do we find ourselves right now and what explanations do we use to account for what is happening and why. Often, our stories about why things are the way that they are are one line, simple statements: “I can’t change how I feel because that’s the way I was raised.” “My life is just too busy for me to add one more thing.” “We could never expect people to give that much.” These do provide an explanation, but they leave little room for the complexities and paradoxes of life, or for the possibilities that a different narrative might allow us to see.

Our stories explain things, but they can also become self-perpetuating and limiting if we don’t take them out and analyze them once in awhile, in the light of day, to see how they color our perception, and therefore limit our options. We can’t see

alternatives to our current situation until we can examine what we currently are telling ourselves. We need to start seeking out and considering facts, data, and options that are different than our dominant story.

After surfacing the operating narratives that currently shape our perceptions, step two in working with our stories is revising. In this phase of the process, we look for exceptions, for examples of things operating differently than our story has allowed us to consider.

When we consider options outside of our usual story, we find examples of what could be, of possibilities we've never considered before. We're looking for those things that are "exceptions to the rule" that point to an alternative story for us to consider adopting. It's not about replacing a wrong story with a right story. It's about considering the possibilities to create a new or different story, and therefore create new or different alternatives and outcomes.

From this new place of possibility, we can then begin the third step, recomposing our stories. Here we are consciously choosing to rewrite the stories through which we filter our experience of the world, based on new information and possibilities. We are choosing to live in a new way, through an alternative story we've developed that allows us to better achieve the vision of how we want our lives to be.

We live in a time of change and upheaval, but it need not necessarily be only a time of loss. Change gives us the opportunity to shake ourselves out of our ruts and comfort zones. Use this time to figure out new ways to go about your life. Invest in your relationships, bolstering existing ones that nurture and sustain you and developing new ones that add new options and new perspectives to your life. Give up the delusion that you are too "whatever" to make a change in how you do things. Winston Churchill said, "Who would want to live to be 90? Everybody who is eighty-nine." It's never too late for hope.

One of the purposes of being involved in a religious community is to develop, bolster, and celebrate our faith. Whatever our theology, I believe we share a faith in humanity. Fundamentally, we believe that the ability to address and resolve our human concerns is resident within the human family.

Ultimately, I hope you have faith in yourself. Faith that you will know what you need to do and that you are enough - smart enough, creative enough, and resourceful enough - to meet what life brings your way. I hope, too, that you have faith in this community and your place in it, if you find you don't know what to do. I hope you have comfort in the knowledge that this community is here for you, that we care about you and we'll be there to help you figure out what you can and will do.

Hope may be hard to find, but it's not impossible. And, even if we can't change the entire world, there are things we can do to shift our perceptions and make changes. When we change our story, we open ourselves to the possibility of resourcefulness, creativity, and action.

On your order of service this morning, I'd like you to write a few notes for yourself about the things that remind you to be hopeful. (Allow time) Would anyone like to share something they put on their list? (Take responses) Perhaps you can post your list around the house as a handy reminder for those moments when you forget to be hopeful and you need a little boost. .

In our first hymn, there is the promise of what we can create when we work together. “Come sing a song with me, so that I might know your mind. And I’ll bring you hope, when hope is hard to find.” Sharing our stories with one another is a part of the process of reworking the past and creating new possibilities for the future. Perhaps this time we’ll change the outcomes of the old stories and find new reserves of hope as we reach out and find our sources of strength, faith, and optimism together. And, in that moment, hope won’t be so hard to find at all.

May it be so.