

Romans 8:18-26

The Anatomy of Hope

George Griffin was at the top of his game. He had a wonderful marriage. Professionally, he was the beloved Chairman of the Department of Pathology at Harvard Medical School. He had devoted his energy researching stomach cancer. In the summer of 1987, he was diagnosed with the very disease he had sought to eradicate. It was an aggressive form of the cancer. The prognosis was very poor. Most of the faculty believed that Dr. Griffin would chose to live whatever days he had left with those he loved rather than subject himself to radical treatments that only had a marginal rate of success. They were wrong. Much to the astonishment and disapproval of his colleagues, George Griffin submitted to the most radical of treatments. When oncologist Jerome Groopman stopped by to see him, Griffin was unrecognizable. Those of you who have witnessed the ravishes of chemotherapy understand. His eyes were sunken and his skin was ashen gray. His entire gastro system was burned, ulcerated, and bleeding. His blacken lips were the outward evidence of what had taken place inside him. Groopman uttered a few placating words and left the room, wondering what kind of false hope had led an intelligent man down such a horrific path.

In the summer of 2000, Groopman ran into George Griffin in the atrium of the hospital cafeteria. It had been thirteen years since he was first diagnosed. Griffin had endured further treatments which required extensive recovery time but after a year, he had declared cured. Groopman never had the courage to question his friend but Griffin knew his colleague had questions so he volunteered the information. He knew that the entire staff disagreed with his course of action. He knew that they all believed he was in denial. He knew they all thought he was clinging to false hope. They were wrong. Griffin knew his odds at every turn as well if not better than anyone. He knew what he would have to endure and he knew there was only a small chance of survival. But a chance, even a small chance, is a chance and he took it. He had real hope. The hope was not based on some pie in the sky optimism; it was grounded in reality. What Groopman also learn was that Griffin was a man of deep faith. Before, during and after each treatment, he quoted the 23rd psalm.

This is one of the many stories that Groopman tells in his recent book, *The Anatomy of Hope*. Over the course of his career, Groopman's understanding of his role as a physical to cancer patients has evolved. He discovered that physicians may win the various battles with proper diagnoses and treatments but the war with cancer patients seemed to be lost in another area. He came to realize that area was hope. His first patients were told virtually nothing about their disease and given false hope of recovery. That did not work well. The patients and their families felt angry and betrayed that they were not trusted with information concerning their own bodies. This led him to tell only the worse case

scenarios to the next group of patients who promptly gave up even trying to fight the disease.

Today, I want us to think about what hope is. Dr. Groopman's analysis provides us with a good description of hope in the cancer ward. The Apostle Paul gives us a great view of hope in theological terms. Essentially, both men are saying the same thing and they have something to say to us.

The Apostle Paul is facing a cancer of his own as he is writing his letter to the church in Rome. It is a cancer of evil. Paul is in prison. He knows he is facing death. It is as if the oncologist has come to his room and declared that there are no more medical treatments for his condition. Death will be coming soon. Yet Paul does not speak as a man afraid to face the end of his life on this earth. In fact, he goes to great lengths to help us all understand the suffering of this world. Paul is not just speaking in individual terms; he is acknowledging a bigger picture. He is asking us to look at the cosmic reality of suffering. All of creation suffers. Nothing is stagnate. The planets move. The earth moves. The oceans move. The plates of ground shift. Weather patterns change. We have earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, and volcanoes. All of these changing patterns produce human and non-human suffering.

Then Paul moves us to human suffering. As creatures, we have beginnings and endings. Our lives move towards our death. In between, our lives are in a constant state of change. The world around us changes. Our society changes. Technology changes. Relationships change. Our bodies change. What is Paul saying? I believe he is telling us that we all need hope. You need hope and I need hope. Our church needs hope. Our world needs hope. Without hope, we fall into despair and cynicism. There is not one person in the room today that does not need hope. There is some area in your life that is causing you fear. You may be in denial about it but its there just ready to raise its ugly head.

Do not confuse hope with a positive attitude. That is not hope. Hope is not looking on the brighter side of life. Hope is grounded in total reality. Hope is knowing you only have a 20% chance of surviving whatever disease you have and taking that chance. Hope is looking at the 24-3 score at half time in a football game and knowing that although the chance is small that you can still win the game, you give it all you have. Hope is a soldier in Iraq trying to make a difference in the lives of people who have been taught to despise you. But there is also hope when the doctor tells you there is no more to be done. Barbara Wilson taught Dr. Groopman about that kind of hope. She had metastasized breast cancer and although it went into remission for seven months, it returned with a vengeance. She had become one of his favorite patients. She always seemed to be planning for a better tomorrow. He dreaded telling her the news that no more could be done. It did not faze her at all. It did not stop her plans for tomorrow. Barbara Wilson knew the hope that Paul spoke of next.

The real hope that Paul had and Barbara had was a hope that cannot be seen. It was a hope that was based in reality. It did not come from reading a Sunday School lesson or hearing the same words over and over in a worship service. It was facing the reality of who they were and who God was. It was knowing that their own chance for being what they were intended to be in this life or in the life to come was God's grace. They were not humanists. They did not believe in their own goodness or good works. They believed in God's love for them. They believed in the relationship that had through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. They had not just heard about grace; they had experienced grace themselves. They knew God. They believed God's promises. That was their hope. You cannot get that kind of hope through a casual engagement with faith. You cannot get that kind of hope through playing church on Sunday morning. You get that kind of hope through a practicing faith that changes your life.

How many of us are willing to get that honest with ourselves today? Churches are filled with secular humanists who believe that we have the power on our own to do whatever we want to do. Churches are filled with people preparing a resume to give St. Peter at the pearly gates. Churches are full of people who hide behind walls of moral superiority so no one will see how frightened they really are. Don't be one of those. It does not work. Humanity has limits. Our moral superiority and good works resumes only add to our pride before God. It is not real. It cannot give you real hope. The world needs real hope. You need real hope.

So, let's talk about hope and the Holy Spirit because today is Pentecost. It was one of three celebrations in Judaism where the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob gathered from all around the known world in Jerusalem. It's been fifty days since Passover and less since the resurrection. It has been nine days since Jesus ascended to heaven and nothing has changed in the disciples. They are still confused and scared but they have gathered for Pentecost. They are in a room filled with people when suddenly there is a rush of sound like a freight train or a tornado. In an instant, they become the people Jesus needs them to be. They are courageous. They are articulate. They have the words they always needed but could never find. Some think they are drunk and we might too if we saw these men who had lived in the shadows suddenly walk boldly forward into the light.

Why doesn't that happen today, you might ask. Well, it does but it isn't quite the spectacle it was that day but it is just as powerful. It does not happen as often today because we live in this ever changing world where the church has become a safe harbor. With everything else around us spinning out of control, we prefer the church to be safe, to stay the same. We do not want anyone to rock the boat. We do not want our sacred cows being made into hamburgers. We want our churches to be stable institutions and before we realize it, our churches become stagnate institutions where the pastor gets a phone call if a piece of furniture is moved.

When I was appointed here eight years ago, I knew this church's reputation as a truly great church but you were having financial problems and most committees were not functioning. You had great ministries but your preschool was becoming a financial burden and sometimes we had trouble funding the Food Pantry. It was difficult to find the Holy Spirit at work. Now perhaps you thought I was sent as a fixer and that might be a talent, but it not my gift. My gift is poking holes and creating cracks which, let's be honest, is not a particularly endearing gift. My little brother will tell you I always do the right thing. Here, the right thing was poking holes. Now I got a lot of help poking holes – COVID created giant cracks and I had to learn better skills. And then there was disaffiliation and while it may have broken institutional thinking, it did not break this church as it did others.

Maybe you could not see it but I saw it – the Holy Spirit was at work We started trying new ways to do things, we got better at hospitality, we got better at seeing and listening to our neighbor, we got better at discernment, we got better at volunteering without waiting to be asked, we got better at communications, we got better at using our building space, and we got better at generosity, we got better at problem solving, we got better at joy, and we got better at leading. Three years ago, we went through an extensive exercise designed to discern our core values. What became stunningly clear is that you know who God is calling us to be and you know exactly what God is calling us to do. We are a mission driven church and that comes deep down from our ultimate calling of hope.

Friends, this community needs this church. We drive missions and we do it by serving with our neighbors. We engage with other churches, black and white, to work with us. We engage with other organizations to work with us. We share our advantages. That is the Holy Spirit at work among us and it has not gone unnoticed by others. We have a small staff but I have not worked with more dedicated people. They live out their faith. It has been such an honor to work with them.

So now I get to share some incredible news. Last week, the Arkansas Food Bank called Tate, our missions coordinator, and told him they were coming to Camden with a surprise on Thursday. Since Tate normally goes to Little Rock every Thursday to pick up food, he said he could save them a trip. No, they wanted to come to Camden. They came to Camden with this blue folder. In it, they are committing to make a major investment in our Food Pantry so it will become one of six Community Resource Centers around Arkansas. This is a dream come true for those who have led our food pantry for the past twenty years. Do you know what this can mean for our community? More food. More resources.

Now for those who think our poverty rates would just go away if people would work, let me give you a few hard numbers. Our Senior poverty rate is 28.8%. Our child poverty rate is 33%. They need our help. They need our compassion. They need our grace. They need food, they need encouragement, and they need resources.

On Wednesday night our Leadership approved this plan – to say they were ecstatic would be an understatement. This is the vision of the Holy Spirit. This is what I have hoped for and it will happen even though I will not be around to see it. I get to retire in awe and wonder of what can happen when we allow the Spirit to work.

So Mike, as the Chairman of our Leadership Team, please come forward to sign this in front of this congregation. It may be your signature but every single person has played a part in making this happen.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.