

Sermon for The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Christ Episcopal Church, Middletown, New Jersey
October 8, 2017
The Rev. Dr. William Carl Thomas

O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As dusk was descending about 17 years ago in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, I came upon a car with a bumper sticker with this thought: “My world has grown cold and is without hope.” The fact this bumper sticker, “My world has grown cold and is without hope” was affixed to a pizza delivery vehicle made me smile. I pitied the people who would finally receive a pizza from this delivery person.

Pity is not my emotion as I remember that 59 people were killed and over 500 wounded in Las Vegas last Sunday night by a single gunman firing from the 32nd floor of a luxury hotel suite into a concert. My emotion is sorrow. And such has been my sorrow that that I could almost agree with the sentiment of the bumper sticker, “My world has grown cold and is without hope.”

Almost agree. The word “almost” pulls me back from the edge of despair. “Almost” lets me find the willingness to disagree that the world has grown cold and is without hope. Much like a soldier seeking to give the last full measure of devotion, I hear these words from the burial office of the Episcopal Church as I mourn these senseless deaths:

Grant, O Lord, to all who are bereaved the spirit of faith and courage, that they may have strength to meet the days to come with steadfastness and patience; not sorrowing as those without hope, but in thankful remembrance of your great goodness, and in the joyful expectation of eternal life with those they love. And this we ask in the Name of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

We are set upon by the hazards of our existence such as hurricanes or as President Trump put it so well, the pure evil of the Las Vegas gunman, that it seems as if we are in a continual state of bereavement. We mourn the loss of a less complicated past as we engage a most stressful and anxious present. And we pray for a future where joy conquers despair.

Grant, O Lord, to all who are bereaved the spirit of faith and courage, that they may have strength to meet the days to come with steadfastness and patience; not sorrowing as those without hope.”

“Not sorrowing as those without hope.” What, then, is hope? For me, hope is the hinge that brings relationships into focus. Hope needs the past to give strength in the present as we seek the future. We who are bereaved find hope to be the hinge that opens the door to that spirit of faith and courage. Hope offers us the strength to meet the days to come with steadfastness and patience. Hope makes perseverance possible.

The word “hope” is not found in the scripture proclaimed in today’s readings. Yet the Apostle Paul, in the passage we heard that he wrote to the Church in Philippi, writes as only a convert can about how he lives into the hope he has found in the relationship he now has with Christ Jesus. This relationship is of surpassing value to his former life which he lived, in his words, as one observing “righteousness under the law, blameless.” Paul knows what it means to live in a state of bereavement as he writes, “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

Paul is not sorrowing as those without hope. Using an athletic image that evokes the perseverance of soldier seeking to give the last full measure of devotion, Paul finds hope to be the hinge that opens the door to that spirit of faith and courage with these words: “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

When a bumper sticker expresses darkness with the words, “my world has grown cold and is without hope,” pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus ignites the light that gives us the strength to meet the days to come with steadfastness and patience. Hope is the match.

The 2017 Calico Fair is one light that hope ignited to burn bright against the darkness of our most stressful and anxious present. I was told that when the fair was cancelled in 2014, there was despair that Christ Church was a parish that had grown cold and without hope. The

spirit of faith and courage infused the parish as we met the days to come with steadfastness and patience. Hope became our hinge as relationships were restored with God and one another. The joy that conquered despair found in the love and laughter of the 2017 Calico Fair is the living expression of what it means to claim, “We belong to one another. Together, with God’s help, we can make one another stronger.”

Over the past two weeks, as many of you know, I have lived in a stressful and anxious place. My mother was transported in a non-responsive state on Wednesday morning, October 20th, from Windsor Pointe to the hospital. I flew to North Carolina anticipating her possible death. I wrote the following on Facebook: “I ask your prayers for my almost 92-year-old mother Dorothy. Much has happened since yesterday morning. Simply, she is in a deep sleep as her body deals with what was most likely scattered mini-strokes. I'm with her in Cary NC as we wait for what is revealed over the next 24 to 48 hours. My thanks to my brother Jeff who lives nearby and keeps a close eye on Mom in her assisted living facility. Until this incident, Mom has been active including adding exercise classes to her weekly routine. She raised six boys of which I am the oldest. I feel that combating scattered mini-strokes is nothing compared to that challenge. Thanks for letting me share how much I love this incredible woman. Your prayers are most appreciated.”

My mother is the epitome of perseverance and another light burning against the darkness. She has returned to Windsor Point, able to speak, eat, with full range of movement. She will need physical and occupational therapy in order to return to what she calls her “Mom Cave” assisted living studio apartment. Mom is a hinge of hope.

You’ve noticed that I placed the Pascal Candle before the altar much as I would on Easter Sunday or at a funeral. As I pose the following questions, please focus on the Light of Christ, the light that darkness could not overcome, the light that reminds us that Jesus is our hinge of hope, the one who restores relationships through love.

What pulls you back from the edge of despair? What gives you hope? Are you a hinge of hope? There were many such hinges of hope in the Las Vegas crowd who helped others while bullets flew by. Police and first responders, hospitals that coped with grace, skill, and yes, steadfastness and patience.

How do we assure hope for a better future? We can take stock of our past that led to our present, as Paul did in his ruthless summation of his own life before he met the love that is Christ Jesus. Paul knew that he had to change and had the spirit of faith and courage to press on toward the goal of the heavenly prize of the call of God in that love. How do we hear the call of God in Christ Jesus as we face the pure evil of gun violence or the aftermath of natural disasters such as the recent and current hurricanes? Do we have the steadfastness and patience to persevere as we seek to be the light in the darkness of a world thought to be cold and without hope?

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may have faith, courage, and strength to meet the days to come with steadfastness and patience; not sorrowing as those without hope, but in thankful remembrance of your great goodness as we press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in your love.

All these words I offer in the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen