

A Table of Hope

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Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14

Final sermon in the 4 part series “Hope Rising”

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as recorded from the audio tape

Good morning.

Today is the 4th Sunday in the series we have been doing on “Hope Rising.” Somebody said to me this week – “so today is the end of hope,” and I said “No, it’s just the end of the series. I trust that hope will continue. That’s why we are talking about it.”

It’s been a lot of fun to do this series, and I want to express my appreciation to you for your comments, for participating in the conversation with me even after we have left here on Sunday mornings – the emails, the phone calls, just running into each other during the week, sharing a story or two. I have appreciated and enjoyed that.

This morning I want to focus on this last Sunday on the Table of Hope. A table that today has symbols of many people’s work in various occupations, professions. It is also set with bread and wine. A table of hope.

We have talked about hope being a spiritual quality. Hope is more than optimism. Optimism is looking on the bright side of things. But sometimes there is not a bright side to see. Hope is what endures when there seems to be nothing else to hold onto. Hope is a big word. We have talked about building hope. Not only having hope in the moment, but actually strengthening our connections. The connections with ourselves and the One who is Holy. As we build the hope, we are stronger when the hard times come – and you know that they will come – and when they come, there is something that will carry us because we are grounded. We have built our faith. Paul says: Faith, hope, and love, these three. Hope is an important spiritual quality, that I have been inviting us to spend more time nurturing and building.

There’s a story in the book Hope Rising by Kim Meeder, she directs a horse farm in Oregon with horses that have been rescued from abuse and neglect. I’ve been telling stories from this book for the past few weeks. She begins the book with a story about a boy named Adam. Adam has grown up in a very violent home. He shows up one day at the farm with a social worker, because he is now under the care of DSS – and they show up unannounced because he just wants to see the “angels in horsehair.” There are children doing all kinds of things with the horses at the farm, and here is Adam with the social worker, and Adam is standing there looking down – he won’t even look up. Kim Meeder bends down to talk with Adam and asks: “Adam, have you ever ridden a horse before?” Adam shakes his head no. Then she says to him: “Would you like to ride a horse?”

Adam lifts his head up and looks at her – and begins to smile. He nods his head to say “yes, I would like to do that.” They make some arrangements as she tells him – there is a pony that would really like you to ride him today. She connects him with this pony named Hobbs.

A farm helper goes to introduce Adam with Hobbs. Kim stays to speak with the social worker, and says: “I couldn’t help but notice, when Adam opened his mouth, that his teeth are broken and some missing. Is that the result of what I think it is?”

The social worker said: “A father is suppose to love and cherish and protect his children, but Adam’s dad would routinely hit him in the mouth with his fist – thus breaking out his teeth. But there is more. His father would occasionally get drunk, and would make Adam run back and forth in the backyard while the father took his rifle and took target practice at Adam. He was reported, and the father is now in prison, and we are trying to help restore some hope to Adam’s crushed spirit.”

Kim went over the begin to work with Adam, teaching him how to gently rub the horse. They eventually got the bridle and saddle on, and it was time for Adam to get on the pony Hobbs. Adam stood next to Hobbs front legs, and suddenly Hobbs did something Kim had never seen any horse do before or since. Hobbs bent his head around to where he was pushing Adam up against the horse’s body in a tight squeeze. Adam began to be afraid as he was pinned by this large animal. Kim watched, not knowing what was happening. Then, speaking these words as she thought them, Kim said: “Adam, I think Hobbs is hugging you. I have never seen any horse do this before, which means you must be very special.”

When Adam heard that the horse was not going to hurt him, and that the horse thought he was special, Adam’s fear began to diminish. He wiggled enough to get his right arm free, and he placed it over the neck of the horse – hugging Hobbs back. The two stood there hugging each other for several minutes in what was a most remarkable and holy moment. And Adam began to say to himself: “He likes me he likes me he likes me.”

When Hobbs finally released Adam from this loving hug, Adam ran up to Kim and said: “did you see that. He likes me!” And for the first time in a very long time, hope began to rise again in Adam.

Hope begins to rise when we feel safe. When we begin to feel like there is a place that we can go with all the hurt and brokenness we feel. Hope can rise in us again, and perhaps – with a lot of help – we can begin to put our lives back together and live the life we were given to live.

In this story in Luke’s gospel, Jesus goes to a home to have dinner. At that table he watches as people begin to jockey for position about where they can sit so they can have the most honor, the most attention. Jesus says to them: “look at what you are doing. Is it not more important that you come to the table, a table that provides us with bread and

wine and companionship, is it not more important that you just come to the table and take a seat – knowing that everyone who comes, in God’s eyes, is loved and cherished.

All of us are the same. Jesus said: “the exalted will be humbled, the humbled will be exalted.” He wasn’t talking so much about what was going to happen at that particular dinner party. He was talking about God being the host of the table, and in the world that God imagines, there’s going to be a “polar reversal.” Those who live with honor and privilege and status are going to be humbled. And those who are least in our world are going to be exalted. It’s like the north pole becomes the south pole, and the south pole becomes the north pole. (this image was used in one of the commentaries I read.) It’s like North America becomes South America, and South America becomes North America. Those who “have “ will be humbled to live as if they have nothing. And those who have nothing will be given the gift of having what they need.

This is not sweet Jesus. This is not the image of Jesus we hang on the wall in the children’s Sunday School classrooms. This is Jesus being confrontive, in your face, and – according to some commentators – both in Jesus day and our time – rude. But Jesus is saying – sometimes people, we have to create a safe place where hope can grow. Where everyone is welcome. Regardless of who they are.

We don’t come from the east and west, the north and south. We come from God’s creation. And yes, we live in those different places, but when we come to this table, we leave all our differences at the door. we carry with us the hurt, we carry the struggle, we carry the pain. We come seeking a healing. We come seeking a community that will help us build the hope.

I wonder what it would be like if we could create a place like Adam found at the farm. Where when you come, you will find the hope that you need. You will find it because you will have the opportunity to be in the presence of the Holy – in yourself and in those around you. There will be no divisions. Those of us who have a lot of privilege and status in society, I wonder what it would be like if we would work at leaving that at the door, like we leave an umbrella or coat. And when we come and gather around this table, we’re not rich and poor, we’re not gay or straight, we’re not male or female, we are the community of all of God’s wonderful people.

And as we leave, having been nourished with sacred story, bread, and wine, we take with us, not the need to increase the status and privilege, but the desire to build the hope – that helps us to grow the realm of God – as God has called us to do.

God is going to transform the world, and God invites us at this meal to be aware that we too can grow the hope that can help transform the world.

Hope rising. It is a part of our tradition. It is what Jesus called us to do. Hope rising when there seems to be no hope anywhere at all. Hope – it grows as we gather at the table, as we learn each other’s names we learn of the struggles we all have, and we commit to

build a world that is more just around the struggles that our brothers and sisters have to live with.

I have been working with the people from the Smithfield Pork Processing Company in Tar Heel, NC. They have a place there where the workers have to process so many pigs in an hour, the production line moves so fast, the water is so slippery on the floor, and they are working with sharp tools – people get injured, and then they often get fired – especially if they complain or ask for the conditions to improve. It is not a safe place. The company has refused time and again to let a union be organized or to improve the conditions. But you see, we gather at a table and eat that food. When we are aware of those kinds of conditions, I ask us, can we not extend the hospitality of this table back to them, to create working conditions that are safe for all. This is just one example of many.

I invite us on this last Sunday in this series on Hope Rising to remember the workers that often work under the harshest conditions to bring us the food at our table. I invite us to learn and to be aware. I invite us to care. We can make a difference if hope rises in us.

Jesus said: “the exalted will be humbled, and the humbled will be exalted.” But what God really wants is for us to sit at the table together, all of us side by side, all of us neighbors, all of us the same. I think that’s what we did at Room in the Inn. We all sat at table together – the workers and guests alike – and shared a meal and the stories of our lives.

I invite us to continue to find ways to do that with each other and with those in our community. May hope continue to rise in us out of the seeds of this sacred story. Amen.