

PRACTICING HOPE

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Viki Brooks
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Genesis 8:8-17; Mark 5:25-34

Welcome back! This is a new day, a new time in our individual and corporate life. We gather today with a certain sense of inquisitive expectancy. Who will be here, how are folks doing after more than a year, will we see new faces, what will this church season hold? Along with expectation comes a touch of the anxiously tentative. How is this socially distanced, contactless, song-less worship going to work? Lean into today with both reactions to our presence among these people and in this building. The governing body of this congregation cares deeply about providing you with a time where community may be safely experienced and that you sense God's presence

While I am new to your pulpit, I have been, like several I know in the Capital Region, a distant observer of this church, attending on occasion to hear one of my colleagues preach or bringing a friend who finds the drive out here onerous. I've often pondered that your unique claim to community might be more dependent on in-person, palpable presence than many congregations I know. It is as if each summer, in your 10 weeks of summer gatherings, you try to absorb a year's worth of fellowship. A simple coffee hour is not enough to satisfy your thirst for fellowship. Each Sunday you leave the fellowship of the word preached and the prayers offered and take it to a coffee on the lawn, as I understand it. I confess, I have never stayed. It is not a 10-minute excuse for a hasty cup of tea but a considered time of conversation. But that too is not enough for this community of connection. You change venues again to the homes and lawns of various community leaders for a meal. Not the spiritual meal of tiny pieces of bread and juice, but you break the bread of a full meal sometimes for hours at a time. To embody the community celebrated at Rensselaerville, the fellowship begins at 11 and often ends after 3. That is a hefty appetite for the community that embodies the divine.

And then there was COVID. A virus that threatened our security and yanked us from in person community. Fellowship this past year tended to be mitigated by screens and electronic glitches rather than hand clasps offering peace and food shared under a warm sun. The appetite for gathering was left untended. The need for the common spaces of this community was set aside for masks and solitary meals, even on holidays. The sense of isolation was real, solitary and long. After a year of abstinence how do we reenter the embodied sense of

fellowship you have practiced for decades? How do we practice the hope found in fellowship after such a long and in some cases traumatic year?

The gospel lesson today offers us of one story of a return to community. A nameless woman enters the presence and power of Jesus with both expectancy and anxiousness. There are often many rich truths to be mined in the parables of Jesus and today's account is no different. For this morning, however, I want to focus on the profound sense of hope the nameless woman brings into her experience of the presence of Jesus.

This no-name, powerless female in our story today had been ill for many years. Her malady was the quiet kind that kept her from mixing in polite society—actually, any society. She lived the life of one ostracized as unclean, unacceptable. She knew loneliness and desperation, separation and fearful uncertainty. Her social isolation was imposed by a condition she could not control. Her quarantine involved no reprieve. There were no FaceTime visits from family or friends. Her synagogue did not offer a Zoom or YouTube version of worship. Her isolation was severe.

She relied on the others around her who were equally shunned. Her pod was the unclean lepers, hemophiliacs and skin-diseased. But word of Jesus came to her via these marginalized mates. He can heal. He will restore you. He can stop the source of your isolation and reinstate you to the life of the synagogue and market place. He had an amazing gift, she could be restored, returned and could reclaim a place in society. Can you imagine the motivation she had to be in the presence of this healer—this Jesus?

The story tells us little about the particulars of this woman. We do know some about the society in which she functioned. We know that stories of Jesus and his ability to bring restoration were legion. People who knew exile from synagogues or distances from places of power were the ones who shared his good news most effectively. Many saw the healing and restoration for themselves or shared a relative of those receiving the blessings of Jesus's presence. It was the sharing of these truths that began the foment of our nameless woman's hope in approaching Jesus.

This is a story of radical hope. Our protagonist prepared for her healing by telling herself that it was possible. She could be healed and restored. Her truth, as the story tells us, was that she had only to touch the hem of his robe. And touch it she did, full of the certainty that she would be made well. Can you imagine the rush of relief and gratitude that flooded her the moment she knew she was well? Wow. Just wow.

Is it possible for thinking, caring Christians, in today's complex world, to practice the hope we see in this nameless woman? Can we enter our lives with some audacious assurances that all will be well without falling into a Pollyanna or rose-colored glasses stereotype? I am pretty sure that between the burden of hearing death tolls from COVID and the insanity of our political reality, that kind of hope is hard to get our arms around. But, stretching to meet it is a call to faithfulness.

Over and over during this pandemic people have been called upon to affirm their responsibility to each other. Yes, we told the painful stories of the dying over our Zoom meetings and conference calls, but we also posted rainbows. Or hung them in our windows. This ancient symbol of God's presence became a delightful splash of color across many Capital Region neighborhoods and beyond. Originally intended to give school children something to count or notice on their quarantined walks, these presentations of color reminded many that there is something bigger than our current reality that we can depend upon. There was hope that one day we will return to community. Not everyone knew the reference to the rainbow symbol we hold dear in our tradition, but they caught the hope.

People of the Book, as the Quoran calls Christians and Jews and, arguably, Buddhists, Zoroastrians and Hindus, have long asserted that we worship a God who makes promises to communities. In the stories of Noah and Abraham we can trace these loving promises that embrace nations and tribes bringing them into divine relationship. These promises are the foundation of our hope for the future. They are a pillar of our understanding as people of faith. God will restore our world.

As a part of a *New York Times* series offered by some of 100 influential people of 2020, the Dali Lama wrote about compassion as a linchpin of living through the pandemic. He reminded us of the Buddhist tenet that everyone suffers and with the suffering from this virus, we have a sense of a shared reality. A step toward hope is the acknowledgment of our grief and losses. But it is that suffering that has the potential to pull us back into community even before the threat of the virus is eradicated. When we respond to suffering with a sense of responsibility, we are living a hope that community will be restored. The Times editors for the issue in which these reflections appeared offered a paragraph about the overall truths to be found in all 100 statements. The shared sentiments from these leaders touched on in various ways that resilience and hope will help us change the focus from our grief and losses toward a full and healthy future. Many pointed to history for sources of this confidence. This shared a-religious history adds to the assurances of our faith.

The practice of hope, for our nameless woman and perhaps our pandemic reality, begins with the affirmations that we have overcome adversity before. We, as Christians and as inhabitants of these United States, have a history of overcoming suffering.

Last spring, while fighting my despondency over not seeing my only grandchild for over 3 months, I was tending some of the vegetable seedlings that sat on every sill of our office. These are the plants to be installed in my garden and that of our Schenectady Urban Farm. My mind wandered to times my grandmother would share with me about her victory garden during World War II. She lived through over 3 months of not knowing where her sons were in the overseas theater of that war. One went missing during an air strike, the other in the oceans near Japan. Instead of simply withdrawing from her community, she started a support group for mothers of sons missing in action. She acknowledged the suffering and moved toward supporting the community of people she knew best. Many sons did not return to the states.

Her boys were returned to her. Far from in one piece, but back to the family and community that sent them to war.

How often were the actions of people during those war years called fourth in our national attempt to focus on a time when we could re-enter our communities? I think I heard Dr. Fauci cite it at least twice, and I was not one to stay glued to such reports. I would venture to guess that other nations and other cultures drew on similar rehearsals of suffering overcome. It is a first step in practicing hope.

In our claims as followers of Jesus we have another set of stories that dot our shared landscape with promises for the future. Genesis, in our text for this morning, points to one of the first of those promises. The rainbow is the symbol of God's promise that destruction is not the last word. Our holy scriptures record stories of prophets and judges, of disciples and communities of religious where the yokes of disease or famine or human oppressors are thrown off as an act that leans into our hope for a better time. The hope is built on the promises of God and given fulness by the actions of creation. This is not pie in the sky or Pollyanna wishful thinking. It is reliance on a God who restores. It is a hope that rehearses past acts of resilience amid current experiences of suffering and then takes the lessons to be learned emulating any that are useful to the process of restoration.

We are a community called to practice hope especially in those times when all seems futile. The very act of gathering around the table of communion (or in the case of today's pandemic accommodation, around plastic mini-containers filled with a tiny wafer and three drops of juice) is an affirmation that God's last word is restoration of wellness not brokenness and loss.

Today this particular community of Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church begins our path toward restoration of community. Our first steps in the practice of hope was throwing open the doors of the church, after poring over the guidelines for gathering in these times. We are moving toward our future with caution, and also faith. There are and will be some uncertainties and lots of last-minute accommodations to the disease that still casts a diminishing shadow on our life. We move forward affirming the truth that we find God in this fellowship. We thirst for the company of this particular people at this particular time. We live into the hope that our souls will be restored in the presence of this community. May it be so.

Amen