



I BELONG TO A HOPEFUL COMMUNITY

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN
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No. 2: The Value of Community
Scripture: 1 Peter 3:15

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, it is with real joy that we confess again that Jesus Christ is Lord. In these moments as we prepare to listen to your word we submit ourselves afresh to the truth and authority of the scriptures.

May the same Holy Spirit, who caused these words to be written, be at work in our minds to grant us understanding of the truth, to give us grace to receive it and to make us ready to respond obediently to its challenge.

Work out your purposes in each one of our lives for the greater glory of Jesus.
Amen

It has been said that a person can live about 40 days without food, about three days without water.
About eight minutes without air.
But only one second without hope.

We all need hope and God has called his people to be hope dispensers. So important is this holy work that we are never to let up for a moment. Indeed Peter writes, **"Always (not just occasionally) be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have." (1 Peter 3:15)**

Now this is of interest to us because community is one of the vital values of Autumn Ridge.

We want everyone who comes through our doors to feel that they belong. That is why we have started a series on **The Value of Community**.

We are examining what belonging to the community of faith involves. Today we are looking at what it means to say **I BELONG TO A HOPEFUL COMMUNITY**. There is an outline in your RidgeLines if you would like to follow along with me.

This morning we are going to grab four handfuls of hope and stuff them in our heart, so that we leave here more hopeful people than when we arrived.

The first handful reveals that **OUR HOPE IS GROUNDED IN GOD.**

How do we have hope?

Paul tells us, **"Having been justified by God's grace we ... have the hope of eternal life." (Titus 3:7)**

In his grace God sent Jesus to die on the cross for us.

At the Father's command Jesus came for hopeless people in a hopeless world.

He brought us God's gift of hope.

So hope in God. You will be glad you did.

The Psalmist sings, **"How happy is the person whose hope is in the Lord their God." (Psalm 146:5)**

But what does it mean to hope in God?

To hope in Yahweh is an expression created by the Old Testament writers. It has the meaning of being stretched out towards God, to long for him, to wait for him.

So an Israelite could say, **"You O Lord are my hope." (Psalm 71:5)**

God is the object, embodiment and guarantor of his peoples' hope. So David can affirm, **"My hope comes from him." (Psalm 62:5)**

There is a strong eschatological dimension to hope.

Hope is our confidence and trust that in all things God will accomplish his purposes.

Christian hope points us to the end of the history when the victory and triumph of Christ will be seen.

However our hope as Christians is not just about the future. It is also about the here and now.

For hope speaks to our trials and failure, our pain and disappointment, our illness and death.

Hope is specifically about these realities as well.

Hope is for the next year, the next week and the next hour. Hope is the fuel that gets us up tomorrow.

Hope has its greatest power in a context in which things are not good and where there is much that might otherwise recommend despair, fear and hopelessness.

For hope can take any circumstance, no matter how discouraging, and transform it into growth, wisdom, witness, perseverance and courage.

Paul had witnessed this change that hope produces and from personal experience he writes, **"We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)**

This is one of the most hopeful declarations in scripture because it states there is no circumstance, no evil, no disappointment, no failure, no war, no economic

recession, no marital breakdown, no illness that is beyond God's transformative power to work good in our life.

Not just in the hereafter but in the here and now.

In other words with hope we can cope.

People of hope can say, **"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."** (Philippians 4:13) Hopeful people become solutions centered people for hope is the God given ability to see possibilities in the everyday problems of life.

Hopeful people can declare, **"God has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us.**

On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us." (2 Corinthians 1:10)

So if you find yourself feeling hopeless today the starting point of finding the hope you long for is to call out to God. He is the provider of hope and he has an ample supply. Ask him to pour his hope into your heart.

Request that he take away all your sin and sorrows and in their place fill you with his healing hope.

That is what we must do for one another in the communities of our small groups.

If a brother or sister is in despair we must point them to God. We pray that God's hope will be theirs and then we provide practical evidence of God's hope by meeting their physical needs.

Let's grab a second handful of hope. Here it is: **OUR HOPE IS BIRTHED BY THE RESURRECTION.**

Peter writes, **"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."** (1 Peter 1:3)

Now there is an element of personal biography in this statement. The resurrection of Jesus was a life-changing reality for Peter. When Jesus died on the cross it was the end of Peter's hopes.

He only knew bitter sorrow for his denials.

Then on Easter morning Peter learned from the women that the tomb was empty. He went running to the grave and saw that it was true.

Later that day Jesus met with Peter. Hope was reborn in Peter's heart with the sight of his living Lord.

In the same way Christ's resurrection spells hope for us. Not just because Jesus lives, but because by God's mercy we live too.

We are given new birth by God.

He fathers us by the resurrection of his son. In Christ's triumph God makes all things new, beginning with us.

Now this is a grand truth for us to share with the hurting. It means we can offer hope in every possible situation.

Because of the resurrection we can be sure that things will get better, either in this life or the life to come.

Right now we may be going through our own Good Friday when the sky is black, the earth is shaking and we are crying out to God, "Why have you forsaken me?" But listen, Easter is coming.

A resurrection day will dawn when the justice and goodness of God will be seen. This is our hope.

The church is at her best when we are handing out hope.

Heather Gemmen was raped by an intruder while her husband was attending a meeting at church.

She was devastated by this violent violation of her body. She wondered if she would ever be able to sleep again as the rapist woke her from a sound sleep.

Heather tells her story in her book, "Startling Beauty: My Journey from Rape to Restoration."

She describes how her church gave her hope writing, "I had not been abandoned by God and his people proved it. Sometimes we forget what the church was created for, to teach us how to live, how to care for each other in love and how to draw others to Christ."



But the sentence that took my breath away was when Heather said, "I gave birth to a precious baby girl, conceived that fateful night, she is now my daily reminder of God's restorative love."

Heather could write that statement because she belonged to a hopeful community.

Every one of us needs to belong for we human beings are hope guzzling machines. This provides the church with our greatest opportunity. James Steward wisely noted that, "The very disillusionment of our day is the raw material of the Christian hope."

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Morgan Freeman played the role of a convict wrongly imprisoned for 40 years before new evidence released him.

The convict said to his friend, "Hope is a good thing. Maybe the best of things."

That is why it is so important that we belong to a hopeful community.



Here's the third handful of hope: **OUR HOPE IS ENCOURAGED BY SCRIPTURE.** Walter Brueggeman says that hope is the central subject of the Bible. The Apostle Paul would agree.

He writes, **"For everything that was written in the past is written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." (Romans 15:4)**

In the Bible we have the record of God's gracious dealings with his people in the past and his promise to deal with us faithfully today. God's commitment to our welfare gives us hope and his character is the foundation for that hope.

Scripture has a despair banishing power.

Spurgeon used to tell his people, "For me there is no joy in life and no hope in death, except in the gospel."

That is why our small groups must be based around the word of God. It is great to have fun together.

It is utterly appropriate to laugh and play and eat together but let's make sure it does not stop there.

We need to feed on the bread of life and find joy in Jesus' teaching.

When the opportunity comes to share our hope with others let's look for creative ways to impart the words of eternal life which are the source of everlasting hope.

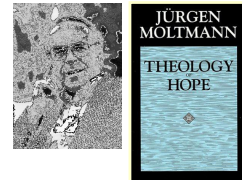
I have often told you before that one of my favorite theologians is Jurgen Moltmann.

The reason for my affection for him is his splendid book entitled "Theology of Hope."

What makes it so extraordinary is that there is no earthly reason why Jurgen Moltmann should have written about hope.

He grew up in Hitler's Germany.

He was planning a career in quantum physics when he was drafted into the German army at the height of the Second World War.



Moltmann was assigned to the anti-aircraft batteries in Hamburg. He witnessed friends incinerated in the fire bombings of that town and the question, "Why did I survive?" haunted him.

After surrendering to the British, the young German soldier spent the next three years in prison camps in Scotland and England.

When Hitler's empire imploded exposing the moral rot at the center of the Third Reich, Moltmann saw how other German prisoners, "Collapsed inwardly, how they gave up all hope, sickened for the lack of it, some of them dying."

As he learned the truth about the Nazis, Moltmann felt an inconsolable grief about life.

He was, "Weighed down by this somber burden of guilt which could never be paid off."

So what turned this hopeless man into an ambassador of hope? It started when an American chaplain gave him a New Testament and Psalms signed by President Roosevelt. Jurgen Moltmann read this words, "If I make my bed in hell, behold thou art there."

He wondered, "Could God be present in this dark place?"

As he read on Moltmann found words that perfectly captured his feelings of desolation. He became convinced that God was present even behind the barbed wire, indeed especially behind the barbed wire.

Moltmann also found something new in the Psalms.

It was the promise of hope.

On his release Moltmann went to seminary.

He became one of the leading theologians of the last century by developing a glorious theology of hope.

In a famous single sentence Jurgen Moltmann expresses the great span from Good Friday to Easter.

It is a summary of human history, past, present and future. He writes, "God weeps with us that we may someday laugh with him."

That is the sort of hope that scripture encourages.

Now for our fourth handful of hope: **OUR HOPE IS FUELED BY FAITHFULNESS.**

There is a wonderful statement in Hebrews that tells us, **"God is not unjust, he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you helped his people and continued to help them.**

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure."

(Hebrews 6:10-11)

Here we have a wonderful promise that as we help others our own hope becomes stronger.

Let's see how this works out by taking a seemingly hopeless situation.

Here's an individual who is extremely unpleasant.

No one wants to be around them.

But we refuse to give into despair for we are people of hope. We will not give up on this person for God did not give up on us.

So we seek to befriend them even though our help is spurned. Yet we persevere for God has promised to honor our faithfulness.

Perhaps he honors it by changing the person.

Instead of being sour they become sweet and that transformation fuels our hope.

Of course that transformation doesn't always happen and there may be no obvious change, at least in the short term, but God is not unjust. He doesn't forget our work and the love we have shown him as we have helped his people. By our diligence God causes our hope to become more sure.

Remember that Peter said we are always to be ready to dispense hope, however bad our circumstances may be.

Peter was writing to suffering Christians.

They were being interrogated because of their faith in Christ. Some would be put on trial and questioned by the authorities.

Peter is warning them to think through their answers ahead of time so they are not embarrassed by a long silence when someone asks, "What is your hope?"

The point is that when Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives each crisis becomes an opportunity for witness.

Last week I asked you to do something strange for others. You have been busy being a peculiar people. Becky even had a t-shirt made announcing her weirdness.



I walked into Panera this week and one of our men with a good sense of humor said, "I am standing in line behind you, John, hoping you are going to pay."

On Friday I was in Perkins with Max Gernand being delightfully served by Peggy McDonald.

When it came to time to pay the bill Peggy informed me that someone had paid for it and gave us this card.

I have no idea who you are but I want to say you are a fantastic and gloriously strange congregation.

Now I don't suppose any of us have seen an amazing transformation as a result of these acts of kindness.

But let me ask you this.

Has your hope grown or declined as a consequence?

I think most of us have found it an encouraging experience.

Our hope, and therefore our faith, is stronger as a result.

That is the proof of this promise from Hebrews.

Now in any small group there will be some who are going through difficult times. The rest of us are to surround them with love.

We show love by speaking truth, by encouraging them to conquer sin, by reminding them of God's forgiveness. By pointing them to Christ. When we do this we are fanning the flames of hope in our group.

Sooner or later we will be the one in need and then we will be on the receiving end of this ministry of hope.

The result may be that we no longer refer to our community as a small group but as hope group for that is exactly what we are to be.

We began with Peter's exhortation to always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks about the hope that we have.

We can all improve in this area and we have listed some resources on the first page of your Ridgelines.

Now some people are very good at personal evangelism but others find this hard. Recently I listened to an interview with Bob Merritt. He is the Pastor of Eagle Brook which is the largest church in Minnesota.

Bob made a brave confession for the leader of a very successful fellowship.

He said, "I am no good at personal evangelism.

He added, "I hear about Christians on a plane who always share the gospel with the person sitting next to them." He said, "All I want to do is be left alone and read a book."

But Bob recognized this wasn't good enough. God had called him to give a reason for the hope that he has.

He said, "There is something I can do and that is to invite people to church and I do that all the time."

I know his church. It is a hope filled fellowship.

You go there and you will find hope.

A practical way to share our hope is to invite someone to Autumn Ridge.

Studies show that the most effective way of getting people to church is by a personal invitation followed with the offer to bring the person to church and sit with them.

So that is this week's assignment. Let's ask God to lead us to someone that we can invite to church.

To get you in the right frame of mind here is a video about what that might look like.

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