**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC Lay Sunday 6/14/15**

*Hope*

*Charles Mitchell, West Center Church Deacon, preaching*

Hope is a mighty thing. Google it. You know how many results you get? Six billion, two hundred and seventy three million. (Give or take) That’s a lot of hope.

Over Six billion results. Sounds like a lot, right? I thought so too until I saw that Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, is worth Seventy Nine billion. That means that if hope cost a dollar, he could buy it all more than twelve times over. But here’s the funny thing-

Even without any money he could still have hope, And if tomorrow he could lose all hope, even with all that money. Gifts from God are like that.

The church calendar is full. You have Pentecost, you have Trinity Sunday, you have Reformation Sunday, you have Easter, Advent, Good Friday, Lent, and of course Christmas, and many others as well.

Do you have a favorite? I’ve got a few. One of them is a new one for me, a little one - Three Kings Day, when the Three Kings arrive to honor their king. I have to say that part of the reason I like it is because Arroyo’s share the history of their holiday culture and bring all that wonderful traditional food that we otherwise might not know about, and certainly not share in. I look forward to it. I was sad that my family missed it this year.

But of all the holidays and all the celebrations big and small, for me there is one moment that it all comes down to. A single brief moment in the entire dramatic sweep of the church year. I’ve shared it with many of you here and it was something I was unfamiliar with until we joined this church. For me it is the sum total of everything in our faith. I love that about Jesus – He’s always distilling things down to their simplest truest form. Can you imagine? Bringing e*verything* in His church down into a single moment? A simple beautiful moment? For me it’s like a fulcrum upon which everything balances.

Before I go any further, I need to mention the irony here, you see one of my first memories of our church is sitting in a pew with Bambi and seeing the bright sunlight streaming in from the stained glass windows, casting the colors onto the wall over here.

I’d look at those colors and listen while the choir sang. I loved all the brightness – the blue sky above us, the stars that light our sanctuary. Our church is alive with music and light and I love being a part of that. So where is the irony? Well the single moment to which I refer is not on a bright sunny Sunday morning with all of us sitting here as we are today. It’s quite the opposite.

It is a time when the church is in total darkness and complete silence. So much so that if you really give yourself over to that moment on that night you might well find yourself feeling alone and perhaps maybe a little afraid as you think about what the moment signifies.

In your lives, some of you may have found yourselves in a similar place, feeling utterly alone and frightened and so full of the darkness of despair that you almost can’t breathe. If you have, you know that my description doesn’t begin to capture it. Then in the pitch black deathly silence of this room on Maundy Thursday, in one simple gesture, John pulls a match across the strike plate and continuing the motion, he reaches out and lights a candle, and in that moment, in the huge darkness that surrounds us, there is a tiny flame.

That flame is hope and that hope is a mighty thing.

But there is a catch with hope.

In First Peter we read

“*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the deadand into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”*

Woah woah woah, Whadda ya mean “birth into a living *hope*?” Hey, Simon Peter – come on over here a sec. What’s with this hope stuff? What I think you *mean* to say is He has given us a new birth and a ***guarantee*** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, etc. Right?

We don’t die. When our time comes, we catch the red-eye to heaven. See then it’s a simple quid pro quo, “I tell you truly, that I believe in Jesus. I believe he is God’s son and that in his person God came down here to know what it really was to be human. I believe that Jesus is with me always, as my counsel and as my Lord and as my friend. “

So I’m good, I’m set, I believe in The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – so Mom, Dad, all my aunts and uncles, keep a place for us. Easy peasy cider squeezy.

There is a problem though. The problem is that there is only hope. We say the **hope** of Easter. The **hope** of life everlasting. But *I believe, that’s my ticket right? I’m in like Flynn. What’s with the hope? I’m past all hope, I* ***KNOW!***

Except you don’t. It’s not a guarantee. It’s a hope, and you should have hope and that hope should be mighty. You know how my family loves to camp. You know I heard that former Mayor of NY Michael Bloomberg, another multi billionaire, goes tent camping every year. Well something the Mitchell family knows and I’m sure Mr. Bloomberg’s butler knows is how important it is to tend a campfire with care. The truth of the matter is that faith and belief – they’re like a campfire. If you don’t take care of them, they can go out. Rain and wind and doubt will come in and they will threaten that fire. It happens to all of us, even our shepherd, Pastor John. He alluded to that in a sermon awhile back and I thought. “YOU?! How can you not be 100% sure?! You are the pastor! But as he went on I began to understand what he was saying.

It’s okay to have doubt, to question our faith. That’s what Jesus wants us to do, to be honest with ourselves, and if that means we have doubt, then it’s fine. In fact He loves it. It means you don’t take your faith casually, it’s far too important. You see your faith, my faith, John’s faith, they can’t be taken for granted. You cannot have faith without doubt. What is faith without doubt? It’s a sure thing and as with all sure things there is no need for faith. So you tend the fire of your faith and your reward is hope. You want more hope, mightier hope? Then strengthen your faith. How do you strengthen you faith? Well all of us are here, so we’re on the right track. I think we need to question our faith, to look for Jesus in our and in each other. You see it in everyone out there helping each other and giving hope.

Hope keeps us honest. It reminds us that Jesus’ sacrifice wasn’t a guarantee; it was, as Peter told us. “…a birth into a living hope.” It’s a hope that we will join the kingdom of God.

Hope is the kickstarter, it’s the tinder, the kindling, the spark. It’s what you can give someone to make them get started and believe in a positive future.

But isn’t that the same as desire? They want something and go after it? No it isn’t. For one thing hope is something that you can give. You can’t give someone the desire for something. You can try by depriving them of something that they need or like, but actually their desire for it was there long before you arrived. If they don’t want something, like, oh, say cauliflower, there is nothing you can do to make them want it. No matter how you try to disguise it, you can’t give them the desire for it.

But you can *give* hope. You can light that little candle for someone who is in darkness and give them something so simple, yet so profound, that it changes their life. And anyone can do it. It can be huge - a stadium full of sixty thousand fans chanting their name. But it can be as little as a look, just a smile of re-assurance and confidence.

Each Sunday we give the offertory and that money goes to give hope to others. People all over the world who have little or no hope. God gave us hope and we give hope to others. Doing the Lord’s work – that sounds pretty lofty eh? But think about it – when you give someone hope you are doing two precious things. You are telling them that you believe in them and that you are with them and support them and you also tell them that they are someone who is worthy of support. You add to their sense of worth.

Isn’t that what Jesus did for us?

Think of the worst situations, ones that surround us every day – a land torn apart by natural disasters, famine, war, disease, poverty. A child with a life threatening disease, a hostage situation, or someone about to take their own life.

A simple but powerful gift that you can give them all is hope. For those communities torn apart – food, medicine and people are on the way to help you get back your lives. - For the sick child and their family and loved ones – New medicines and therapies that are being developed every day now, at an increasing rate, so please hang in there and stay hopeful, there is every reason for it.

For the person being held hostage- we can and will do whatever is necessary to get you home safely. and even for the person holding them hostage, – everyone can get out of this situation with no one getting hurt, and that they are being listened to.

For that poor soul standing on the precipice- Jesus tells us that love is the greatest gift, but that person might feel that they are unworthy of love, that if you knew them you would see that. Even love may not always be the answer, sometimes what’s really needed and is always welcome, is hope.

You make them see that there is hope, but there is only hope if they are alive. That hope should be grasped and pulled in. That hope is a living thing and you need to feed and nurture it with goodness and positiveness. In today’s gospel (by the way I didn’t know until very recently that gospel meant good news.) Anyway in today’s good news from Mark, he tells us about one of Jesus’s parables. How the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, how when this littlest seed on earth – like that little flame from the candle - is sown upon the ground it becomes the greatest of all shrubs. I love that idea – Jesus walking along with a canvas sack full of mustard seeds, scattering them on the fertile ground growing the Kingdom of God.

If you look, you’ll see the little opportunities for giving hope that Jesus scatters before you every day like he did with the mustard seeds. They can be those little random acts of kindness that I’m always on about. Hold a door for someone, give them a sincere smile and tell them to have a nice day, and really mean it. If it looks like someone just got their hair done, compliment them on it. Think about what it feels like when a complete stranger compliments you out of the blue and watch what happens when you do it to someone else.

It’s like touching them with a magic wand and dispensing energy to their hope that their hair looks nice. If you’ll look around you’ll see so many of those mustard seeds that you can help grow into hope for someone.

People might even come away from those experiences thinking “That was really nice! Maybe there is hope for us all after all” YES! There *is* hope. There is always hope. When you give hope you give that person a different outlook, one that might change something small or something huge in their lives, that is a mighty thing.

When you give someone hope it makes you mighty. Hope is also a sacred thing. Hope is generous, and kind and true and loyal and brings joy and laughter. And finally, hope, like friendship, is magic. It is something that all medicine that has ever been given to anyone, *ever*, needs if it is going to work. Medicine, therapy, treatments, none of them can work without hope. Ask any doctor out there.

So we’ve talked about our hopes. Who doesn’t need hope? I suppose you might think that as the everlasting, Jesus doesn’t need hope, He is, after all, God.

But He needs hope more than any of us. He hopes above all else that you see how much he loves us with a love so great that he willingly died for us. In that greatest gift He only asks that come to Him and have faith in Him and love Him and love each other and that you will share the good news of His love for the world.

So as we go forth, let’s celebrate hope for the newest member of our church, Daisy-Grace. May she grow in a world of love and peace and hope. Let’s go celebrate the beautiful day and be grateful for it. Let’s love each other as Jesus asked us to and finally and SO importantly, know that hope is **never** in vain, EVER! That hope brings life and faith and belief, that hope can do the impossible. so go do the impossible. For hope, like love, a simple thing, but it’s a four letter word that will make you mighty.

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