

Healing and “Hope”, LMF, August 29, 2004

Hope

Esther

Hope Monaghan is four years old. She is dying of cancer. She is our niece’s niece.

Last fall, a normal healthy three-year-old was suddenly diagnosed with a tumour in the brain stem. In October, she underwent all the medical procedures she could, and the parents knew the clock was ticking.

In mid-August, just after her fourth birthday, suddenly Hope took sick, after being symptom-free since last December. Her parents, Richelle and Mike, wrote August 11th in the Journal on Hope’s website:

Hope’s 4th birthday was an incredible Prince and Princess bash. Unfortunately, Hope woke up and was not feeling well and began to vomit before the party. Then extreme fatigue set in but the party began and Hope was having a great time. Up until this weekend Hope had been basically symptom free – and then it hit, and it hit hard.

Even up until this morning it appeared that things had stabilized since her birthday party so Hope went off to Oxford Learning for the morning. I was called to say that Hope was vomiting so I immediately picked her up.

Mike and I decided that it was time to get in touch with The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. Hope had not been there since December 2, 2003. We met with Hope’s oncologist this afternoon in a last minute appointment. We were told that the “honeymoon” period of symptom free time that Hope experienced was an anomaly, they had been expecting to see us ever since April. However, the honeymoon appears to be over.

There are relatively few options for Mike and I to chose from. At this point in time we will continue with Hope’s alternative therapies as long as it seems appropriate. We will also begin giving Hope a very small dose of steroid to reduce inflammation in the area of the tumor. We have also decided on a chemotherapy (called temazolamide) that has very low toxicity so it should not greatly affect Hope’s quality of life. She will take this chemo in the form of a pill and will have to go to the hospital for blood work once every 3 to 4 weeks. This chemo has almost no side effects, including no hair loss, and we may stop treatment at anytime if we feel any possible side effects “are not worth it”. Temazolamide can slow the progression of the tumor to add a month or two of a good quality of life but is not expected to shrink the tumor.

We entitled our sermon today, “Healing and ‘Hope’” because of the *double-entendre* of Hope’s name. To get to her website, which is inserted into your bulletins, one must use the userid “hope”, the password, “faith”. This makes of course two of the three classic “endurables” Paul cites: faith, hope, and love.

Four days after Richelle wrote that entry, she and their five-year-old son, Jonah, joined us for a week of camping at Schoen Lake Provincial Park in an old growth forest 140 kilometres north of Campbell River. The weather was spectacular; the setting magnificent (just nine campsites, three of which our group of 13 adults and 4 kids took over alongside the outflow river from the lake), with Douglas Firs tickling the clouds, and cedars providing copious canopy. It was an idyllic week. For Jonah and Richelle, a wonderful break. There were daily trips to Campbell River or nearby logging village Woss, to make phone calls. On the 20th, Hope and her dad, Mike, flew west to join with mom and Jonah later that day. Last Thursday we met Hope and her dad at an extended family gathering at our house.

On August 17th a benefit concert was held at their Catholic Church, with over 700 in attendance. Mike, a recording artist, sang a song dedicated to Hope, and got through it!

This sermon is dedicated to Hope. We have entitled it “Healing and ‘Hope’”. The *double-entendre* is intentional.

Just what is the Christian connection between healing and hope?

The Good Samaritan
Wayne

The primary biblical text today is the story of the Good Samaritan. It is not mainly about healing or hope. But both factor in significantly at the end.

Usually to understand a biblical text, we begin with *context*. Just what is the text trying to do? What is the question?

The question is supplied right at the beginning of the Samaritan story: “And who is my neighbor?” But that is actually not the first question of the passage – the first question is: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus, in classic pedagogical style, puts the question right back as a question: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”

The man is forced to think – and to reveal his own thoughts: “He answered: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Elsewhere in the Gospels, in Matthew’s, another “expert in the law” asks a slightly different question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” A fascinating response ensues. Jesus gives two commands for the price of one, stating without saying it that love of God is a *crock* if it is not demonstrated in how we treat the *other*: neighbour near, enemy afar.

In fact, Jesus' teaching is consonant with the entire New Testament witness – and can be stated in an aphorism: *“The litmus test of love of God is love of neighbour; the litmus test of love of neighbour is love of enemies. Our love of God is only as strong as our love of our worst enemy.”*

Our “godliness”, our spirituality, our love of God, is only as good as, is predicated on, how much we love, honour, respect, do no harm to, our worst enemy. And who are our enemies? Well, in today's world, they range in the West from those we personally hate, are jealous of, despise, etc., to, for some homosexuals, vile leaders like Saddam Hussein or George Bush, various religious or non-religious icons like Billy Graham or Alice Cooper or Michael Moore or Osama Bin Laden; the list goes on.

Interestingly, in this passage, Jesus claims that “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” According to Jesus, the entire ethical sweep of Hebrew revelation is distilled into these two commands about love – something Paul even telescopes into only one essential, in seeming contradiction of Jesus who expands the ultimate essential into two commands. Paul says: “The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Roman 13:9 & 10)

Love of God is clearly assumed here, though not mentioned. Why? Because love of God, religious observance, worship, are meaningless, pure sham, phoney, a *crock*, if not attended by love of neighbour. Because: *“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”* (I Jn 4:20)

Because, *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not [neighbour] love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”* (1 Cor 13:1-3)

Then Paul in the same Romans passage for me offers the best condensed summary of Law in the annals of all human civilization:
“Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

For 30 years I have wished to see that motto hung over all the criminal law courts of our land, to make it the very essence of criminal justice, to which we shall return.

This legal expert however gets it – that there are two Ultimate Commandments, not just one, that are like two sides of the same coin, that cannot exist apart from the other, that one presupposes, feeds into the other, and back again.

But as soon as Jesus congratulates him for “getting it”, the expert suddenly realizes he has not lived such a life. So the text says, “But he wanted to justify himself...” This is a

universal human response to moral and spiritual failure – and the good news is, we do *not* have to justify ourselves! Someone has done that for us, provided we live up to the “Name” – so Paul writes: “*We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.*” (Gal. 2:15 & 16)

Yet again, Paul writes: “*You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.*” (James 2:24) We are right back to the question next asked in our text, “*And who is my neighbour?*”

The short answer is: *anyone and everyone*. There is nowhere practised in the New Testament a *footnote theology* to the most quoted Bible verse of all time, John chapter 3, verse 16:

“*For God so loved the world [except our enemies] that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes [except our enemies] in him shall not perish [except our enemies, and they are open season in war and the death penalty] but have eternal life [except our enemies, and they can go straight to hell!].*”

It turns out not just “Liberals” in the long history of the church have been masters of the exception clause.....

It’s now Jesus’ turn for a question in our text: “*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*” *The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise.’*” For Jesus says elsewhere: “*But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*” (Matt 9:13)

This text about the “Good Samaritan” teaches us that healing justice is for everyone, *absolutely no exclusions*; and that we are called to apply it to everyone, *absolutely no exceptions*; that we are never to lose hope in well-doing. As Paul puts it: “*And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.*” (II Th 3:13)

That is the way of healing justice; that is the way of healing and “hope”. Faith is the only “ticket” to hope, just as it is the only password on Hope’s website. And love is “*the most excellent way*” that anchors it all. (I Cor. 12:31)

So Paul sums up: “*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*” (1 Cor 13:13)

Medical Story

Esther

Many of you know that Wayne and I have professional spheres or ministries that relate to healing; Wayne in the area of healing or restorative justice and I in the medical field.

We are each going to tell a story from our respective areas of work. In my work with terminally ill people, I have not seen physical healing ; however I have seen much healing take place in the lives of people who are dying, and in their families. This story, written by a Jeanenne Clark, a nurse, is an example of one such healing.

“The Last Gift” by Jeanenne F, Clark

Sometimes, when technology obscures humanity, we come terribly close to losing touch with the special feelings and values that made us become nurses – and then the inescapable of one patient’s despair brings it all rushing back.

In the ICU where I was working one December, there was an isolated room that few would enter and those only briefly, to check the machinery. I soon learned that there was a person in that room with many needs to be met and very little time left: a patient with AIDS.

David was 26 years old, in endstage acute respiratory failure, breathing with the help of a ventilator. His condition had deteriorated rapidly despite aggressive treatment. We could only keep him sedated and as comfortable as possible. He knew he would die soon. I remember him gesturing toward a calendar, his way of trying to ask me how many days were left until Christmas.

Every two to four hours we injected morphine or Valium into David’s veins. One evening after my assessment I was getting ready once more to give him a sedative. He reached up, grabbed my hand, and shook his head, “no.” He motioned to me that he wanted to write. I gave him a piece of paper and pencil. He trembled from fever, his body was limp and sweating; he had a message to express but was too weak to write. I can remember thinking, *I have another patient to see*. But I could read the despair in his eyes as he struggled to form the words.

He tried again and again. Finally, unable to write, he drew a picture of a broken heart. I asked him if his heart was broken. He shook his head.

Groping for an interpretation, I remembered that his father had been in to see him that evening and David had not wanted him to leave – he kept reaching out for his father’s hand. His father left the room, though, saying the nurses needed to work with him. To me, it seemed that the father just could not endure any more that evening. I could see the hurt in David’s eyes.

I asked, “Is your father’s heart broken?” He nodded. He then managed to write “I haven’t” but could not complete the thought. He pointed to the broken heart. I ventured, “You haven’t told your father you love him lately?” His face lit up; he smiled and again nodded.

I asked if he wanted me to phone his father and give him the message. Another nod; he appeared relieved. He had been able to finish his unfinished business. He then took a sedative to sleep. I phoned his father, not knowing how long it had been since the two of them had communicated; knowing his son had not long to live.

After that the father seldom left his son’s bedside. David died 48 hours later, two days before Christmas.

Saddened though I was by his death, he had left me with a memory I would always cherish. He had restored my sense of the essence of nursing.

I felt an inner warmth, and I felt special, because as a nurse I was able to help a dying son convey his message of love to his father. I had taken the time to listen. The bedside nurse is perhaps the only one who *can* take the time to listen, to reach out, touch, feel and share those feelings with the patient. My experience with David replenished me just in time – just when I felt I had no more to give.

Jeanette F. Clark, R.N., CCRN, is a staff nurse in respiratory intensive care, Barnes Hospital, St. Louis. (American Journal of Nursing, December 1991, p. 96.)

Restorative Justice Story

Wayne

Our fall Dinners’ speaker last year was Glenn Flett.

Glenn spent several years committing robberies with violence, until one day he and a partner shot and killed a man during a Brinks Armoured Truck robbery. Through Christian friends inside and outside the prison, Glenn eventually chose to follow Jesus. Changes happened remarkably quickly. But a supreme test came after a woman in Victoria, a Christian pastor, was brutally murdered. She had been a grandmother figure to Glenn through all his criminal years. She had loved him unconditionally.

By a strange twist of circumstances, the man who murdered her ended up in the same prison as Glenn, and finally, in an English class he was teaching! Glenn was a “wheel” in the prison, had a lot of power, and could have called in favours. He could have had this guy killed. Not only did he not do this, but ultimately helped him successfully apply for and obtain parole. Glenn’s new love for Jesus helped him embrace the man who had murdered the most accepting person in his life at that time.

Today, Glenn serves Jesus by reaching out to ex-prisoners through a local government-

sponsored program that helps them reintegrate into society. It is called L.I.N.C.: Long-Term Inmates Now in the Community. He tells his story widely, and is well-known in the larger criminal justice community, and also works closely with us at M2/W2. His wife is Chair of our board.

The amazing healing in his life for many years has been channelled towards healing justice in the lives of several “least of these” in prison, and back on the streets.

He needs prayer especially at this time because of his close involvement with Eric Fish, the man accused of the home invasion beating death in Vernon.

Conclusion

Esther

“Hope springs eternal”, the saying goes. Paul lists it as one of three universal bottom-line realities. Yet Richelle and Mike struggle with hanging onto hope while facing losing Hope – short of a miracle.

So what is healing in their situation? It is not likely full healing for Hope. Though when given the initial diagnosis to expect six months at the most, a more than ten-month symptom-free reprieve has been nonetheless amazing gift, amazing grace. In my conversations with Richelle, she has told me that she is a very different person now from who she was last October. She has significantly altered her perceptions on life and death.

Healing has been the incredible impact their journey with Hope has made on a wide circle of friends and family. Now we bring that impact to you. Their website is supplied as an insert in your bulletins. [<http://www3.caringbridge.org/mo/hope/>, user id: hope; password: faith]

We invite you to reflect on this sermon, view the website, and journey with Hope and have hope from this day forward in your thoughts and prayers.

Wayne

Healing, in the end, boils down to two essentials, the “greatest” and “most excellent way” of Paul’s trilogy, *love*: Love God; Love your neighbour as yourself, which invariably means practising the life craft of forgiveness.

In what I consider the most masterful commentary on loving forgiveness I have ever encountered, and could upon request e-mail to you the full text, I leave you with this part of an interview with Father Thomas Hopko, retired Orthodox priest and scholar from St. Vladimir’s Seminary in New York:

“Your brother[/sister] is your [self/your] life.” I have no self in myself except the one that is fulfilled by loving the other. The Trinitarian character of God is a metaphysical absolute here, so to speak. God’s own self is another – his Son, to use Christian

*evangelical terms. The same thing happens on the human level; so the minute I don't feel deeply that my real self is the other, then I'll have no reason to forgive anyone. But if that is my reality, and my only real self is the other, and my own identity and fulfillment emerges only in the act of loving the other, that gives substance to the idea that we are potentially God-like beings. Now, if you add to that that we are all to some degree faulty, weak, and [unhealthy], that act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That's how I find and fulfill myself as a human being made in God's image. Otherwise, I cannot. So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It's a metaphysical suicide. (Excerpted from *Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition*, "Forgiveness", Volume XII, Number 3, August 1987, pp. 50 – 59, italics added.)*

May God grant us all healing and hopeful journeys into love.

Amen.