

“Stewardship of the Gospel”

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Dr. J. Howard Olds

November 4, 2007

Several years ago Anne Murray had a hit song that went in part:

“Just once, how I’d like to see the headline say  
Not much to print today, can’t find nothing bad to say  
Because...  
Nobody robbed a liquor store on the lower part of town  
Nobody OD’ed, nobody burned a single building down  
Nobody fired a shot in anger...  
Nobody had to die in vain  
Sure could use a little good news today.”

According to St. Paul, the Church is the steward, the caretaker, the conveyer, the conduit of God’s good news. If the world is short on good news, it stands to reason that the Church is not doing its job! So, on this All Saints weekend, I would like to share some profound good news, the good news of Faith, the good news of Hope, the good news of Love.

I HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR YOU: FAITH IS GREATER THAN DOUBT.

The Bible is full of people who had great faith. The author of Hebrews lists a few.

By Faith, Noah built a boat.  
By Faith, Abraham fathered a nation.  
By Faith, Moses liberated his people.  
By Faith, Joshua fought the battle of Jericho,  
By Faith, the saints of history conquered kingdoms, administered justice,  
shut the mouths of lions, and quenched the fury of flames.

In fact, most things are possible when you live your life by faith. Do you believe that?

Thomas was the disciple who had to see it before he could believe it. But Jesus said to Thomas, *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have the courage to believe.”* Faith is the bird that sees the light while it is still night. Faith is the person struggling between “yes” and “no” who lands on “yes.” Faith is the courage to start walking without MAPQUEST directions. Faith is a way of looking at what is seen and believing beneath the surface there is vastly more that cannot be seen.

Nobody said faith is easy or comfortable or convenient. All the great saints of history have had their doubts.

John Wesley, after his great conversion and years after starting the Methodist movement, went to his Moravian friends and confessed that he had lost his faith. He didn’t know what to do. Peter Bohler said to Wesley, “John, preach the faith until you have it and then you can preach the faith because you have it.” All the saints in history have done that.

To live is to struggle, to believe is to doubt, but faith that abides keeps looking up when all of life has you down. So I say to some soul near despair today, “Keep looking up, keep looking up, faith is worth fighting for. Keep looking up.”

I HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR YOU: HOPE IS DEEPER THAN DESPAIR.

It is the philosopher Moltmann who says, “Christianity is completely and entirely and utterly hope, a looking forward to what is yet to come.”

St. Francis taught us to pray, “Where there is despair, let us sow hope.” That is a prayer that we need to practice, for hope is essential; hope is critical; hope is necessary for life. Without hope people die like malnourished children in war torn countries or trapped miners in some deadly hole when all the oxygen is gone. To lose hope is to lose life. It is so incredibly important to hold on to it in every way that you possibly can.

Hope is more than wishful thinking. Hope is more than making it a good day. Hope is more than optimistic confidence that things will

eventually go our way and give us what we want. Hope is deeper than all of that. Hope is confidence that possibilities still lurk around the corner. Hope is the peace that appears when optimism flies out the window. Hope is precisely what we have when we have nothing else to cling to. Or, as one of my favorite sayings goes, "You never know God is all you need until God is all you have." That four-letter word [hope] keeps you alive. People die without hope. You can't make it without it.

Beyond all the hoopla and happenstance of modern church marketing, I think hope is what keeps bringing people to church. Deep down you want that four-letter word to live and abide in your life and to be the reality on which you live. So, a couple stands before me, knees knocking, brows sweating, hoping against hope that the marriage vows they make are the vows they keep so help them God.

Parents present their babies for baptism, hoping the kid won't cry bloody murder when I sprinkle a little water on its head. But there is something else going on. Parents are hoping that God really will help them be decent parents and raise responsible children.

People come here to bury their dead, with hearts so sore you can hardly touch them and tears so rampant they feel like rivers flowing from our heads. Yet, in the loss, they gather in church hoping this is not really all there is, that someday, somewhere, disease will be eliminated; tears will be wiped away, and we shall be reunited with those we love. It is that kind of hope that keeps us coming back.

I HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR YOU: LOVE IS STRONGER THAN DEATH.

John Merrick was perhaps the ugliest human being who ever lived. A disorder known as neurofibromatosis turned John into a human freak. His mother abandoned him at age four. At fourteen, John was picked up by a carnival showman who nicknamed him the "Elephant Man" and charged customers a shilling to see him. All this took place in Europe in the late 1800's and is a true story. One day Frederick Treves, a surgeon at a London hospital, wandered across the street and took a look at the Elephant Man. What he saw was a pitiful bundle of loneliness and despair. Treves finally took Merrick in and discovered beneath this freak of nature not an imbecile, but a gentle, affectionate, loveable creature. He was without grievance and without an unkind word for anyone. Dr. Treves kept working with the Elephant Man and learned to communicate with him. News about him spread and celebrities, actresses and even the Princess of Alexandra came to visit him. John Merrick came to exclaim, "I am happy every hour of the day of my life." I wanted to tell you the story of the Elephant Man because I want you to know today what love can do. It can turn us around.

Don't ever underestimate the power of love to change a life. In a world fixated on the survival of the fittest, the Elephant Man stands as a shining example of why we should not be too quick to dismiss the contributions of others. In the hands of a loving friend, John Merrick had a distinct purpose for living. So do you!

There are twenty million cancer survivors now living in this country. By the year 2050 there will be fifty million. We are not conveniently going away. What are the rest of you going to do with us? Will you put us off into some corner to rot or let us limp beside you for the sake of humanity? It is not going to be an easy decision to make, but I propose that love will find a way. You and I and this country are going to have to decide what we are going to do with the weak, the limping, the broken, the hurting along the way. We must decide.

I believe it was C.S. Lewis who once said, "If you never want to be hurt, never give your heart to anyone or anything. Love nothing - not even dogs, cats, or other animals. For love sooner or later is certain to produce a broken heart, a troubled soul, a grieving mind." So it does.

St. Augustine said, "'tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." In Song of Solomon we read, "*Many waters cannot quench love, rivers cannot wash it away.*"

So as for me, I'll go on living, loving, believing and hoping, "*For these three things abide. Faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love.*"

Amen.

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And Love It:  
“Stewardship of the Gospel”  
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