

The Power of Hope

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

March 24, 2019

Jesus was criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners – people who, in his society, were socially and politically outcast. Just like the younger son in the parable, they had lost their community, their status and, in many cases, their self-respect. Jesus welcomed them into his life just as the father welcomed back his extravagantly wasteful son. But it is the father in the story who is most extravagant. Even before his son has arrived or offered any apology the father rushes out and lavishes him with love. The embrace, shoes, and ring are all signs of restoration to full status in the family. (Slaves went barefoot.) When the son blurts out an apology the father responds with a party – a feast of forgiveness. The faithful elder son is furious at his brother's reconciliation. But the father remains steadfast in loving them both. Whether the elder brother goes to the party or whether the brothers reconcile is left an open question by Jesus.

These parables are not about "the lost", but about the one who seeks out value, a characteristic of God.

Krista Tippett: *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*, 2016

Mystics and monastics pray on embodied behalf of those who can't. In a century of staggering open questions, hope becomes a calling for those of us who can hold it, for the sake of the world. Hope is distinct, in my mind, from optimism or idealism. It has nothing to do with wishing. It references reality at every turn and reverses truth. It lives open eyed and wholehearted with the darkness that is woven ineluctably into the light of life and sometimes seems to overcome it. Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice the becomes spiritual muscle memory. It's a renewable resource for moving through life as it is, not as we wish it to be.

I've traveled a long way since my early life in Oklahoma - far enough to know that I might be accused of taking this virtue of hope too far. So be it. My mind inclines now, more than ever, towards hope. I'm consciously shedding the assumption that a skeptical point of view is the most intellectually credible. Intellect does not function in opposition to mystery; tolerance is not more pragmatic than love; and cynicism is not more reasonable than hope. Unlike almost every worthwhile thing in life, cynicism is easy. It's never proven wrong by the corruption or the catastrophe. It's not generative. It judges things as they are, but does not lift a finger to shift them.

Sr. Joan Chittister: *Scared by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*,

Reality is the only thing we have than can possibly nourish hope. Hope is not based on the ability to fabricate a better future; it is grounded in the ability to remember with new understanding an equally difficult past. The fact is that our memories are the seedbed of our hope. They are the only things we have that prove to us that whatever it was we ever before thought would crust us to the grave, would trample our spirits into perpetual dust, had actually been survived. And if that is true, then whatever we are wrestling with now can also be surmounted.

Hope lies in the memory of God's previous goodness to us in a world that is both bountiful and harsh. The God who created this world loves it and us in it. God has blessed the world with good things, yes - but all of them take working at. God does not do this for us. God does companion us as we go. God has given us in this unfinished world a glimpse of eternity and walks with us through here to their, giving us possibility, giving us hope.

John O'Donohue, Celtic mystic, *To Bless the Space Between Us*

Blessed be the longing that brought you here

And quickens your soul with wonder.

May you have the courage to listen to the voice of your desire

That disturbs you when you have settled for something safe.

May you have the wisdom to enter generously into your own unease

To discover the new direction your longing you wants to take.

May the forms of your belonging - in love, creativity, and friendship -

Be equal to the grandeur and the call of your soul.

May you come to accept your longing as divine urgency,

May you know the urgency with which God longs for you.