

A Sermon Delivered by
The Reverend E. F. Michael Morgan, Ph.D.
Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 17, 2009

Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." (John 15:9-17)

This is the Sixth Sunday of Easter, and today we face new and unprecedented challenges to our faith. Many years have gone by since the first resurrection occurred, and there has been a mixed record as to how well Christians have proclaimed the message over the last two millennia. At times, our faith has been submerged and hidden, and at other times it has been proclaimed effusively and even recklessly. Yet when done well, the Easter proclamation has always been part of our identity in which we both announce and declare that Jesus, the man for others, is also the living Christ. In that declaration we celebrate who we are, and we do all this with a seriousness of purpose from generation to generation.

So our Easter message—which is really no secret at all—as I tried to stress last Sunday; is the centrality of Hope. It is a hope that God will be the victor over evil. Hope that death—the symbol of finality and silence—will not be the last word. Hope that we are created good and that we can go on to “perfection” as Christians have long believed.

This doctrine of “going on to perfection” comes out of the evangelical tradition, and it has relevance for many Christians, even though some are wary and skeptical of any faith claims that do not meet the test of rationality or modernity. Yet the truth is, we do learn from the past.

One pastor put it this way.

Easter means that in this life we can grow more holy – more sanctified to use an old-fashioned word. We do not strive to go on to perfection so God will love and save us. We have already been justified by faith. Going on to

perfection is seeking to become more and more like Jesus. We really can live a life as caring and as justice-filled as Jesus. He was fully human and did it; so can we!”

As Episcopalians, we too have the capacity to share the Easter hope and initiate the quest for “going on to perfection” as even the most dedicated evangelicals do. God certainly encourages us in that direction, and it is our responsibility to take that charge seriously. At the same time, we may need to experiment with some new understandings and new directions if the tradition of Christian perfection is going to take hold.

Over the years the followers of Christ in their pursuit of perfection have found that purity of belief has been inextricably linked to the illusive, yet very real quest, for lasting hope. It has been said, for example, that if faith puts us on the road to righteousness, hope keeps us there; for it is hope that helps us sustain the faith, despite the evidence, knowing that only by so doing has the evidence any chance of changing.

This is an important distinction since it raises an inevitable contrast between two similar yet sometimes conflicting ideals. Earlier this year I preached a sermon that highlighted the difference between hope and optimism. It apparently struck a chord because a number of you spoke to me about it. The fact is “hope” has very little to do with “optimism.” In fact the opposite of hope is not pessimism, but despair—deep, deep despair—which is the real challenge of our age.

Consider this. If Jesus never allowed his soul to be cornered into despair, and there is ample evidence suggesting that is the case, then clearly we modern-day, highly-educated Christians shouldn’t worry about that either. True, despair is the pressing challenge of our modern era, just as it challenged Jesus in his time. But it can be overcome.

So let me close with this brief and pithy insight by the late William Sloan Coffin, who said: “Hope criticizes what is, whereas hopelessness rationalizes it. Hope resists, while hopelessness adapts.”

The important phrase here is contained in the two words – “hope resists” – and I want to leave you with that thought in mind. When you are resisting something, you may be at your most hopeful best. When you are resisting something with particular intensity, look at what you are contending against;

an injustice, an imperfection, a flaw, a shortcoming, a weaknesswhatever! Note what it is that is driving you to resist so strenuously. More than likely it is the hope you sense that you can overcome the obstacle in your way. You come to believe hope will win the day. Hope gives you a sense of power and force for good. Hope redeems, and religious hope especially, as the Nicene Creed suggests, provides for us and for our salvation the “means of grace and the hope of glory.”

In simple terms: hope resists evil, and with profound and utter mysteriousness hope overcomes the power of death. Christians see this hope in the resurrection of Jesus from the grave: and Christians rejoice because...

He is risen. He is risen indeed. Allelulia.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

The Rev. Caroline Edge, Needham, MA
William Sloan Coffin, CREDO, 2004