

June 10, 2018 • Rev. Robert English Farewell • Baptism

## “Be the Hope”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English



2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

*But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—“I believed, and so I spoke”—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.*

*For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*

One day, a little while back, at preschool pick up I was talking with one of our preschool dads, named Moze, about our new ‘Be the Hope’ sign in the courtyard. I was telling him about all the cool new features, about how it lights up at night and changes colors from green to red to blue. He said, ‘oh, let me tell you a story about that sign.’ One morning he was getting his two preschoolers ready for school but they were having a morning.

Every part of the morning routine was like pulling teeth. From breakfast to getting dressed to brushing teeth to getting the nap bag together, everything was a struggle. Moze said that he was getting more and more stressed, more frustrated as they just kept running later and later and later.

Finally, after a long morning at home they got in the car and headed to school. Well, as you can imagine, of course they hit traffic on the way into to Santa Monica. Moze was sitting there in traffic and he was stewing, when all of the sudden from the back seat, totally unprompted, he heard his son Jack say, “Dad, just ‘be the hope.’”

In that precious moment, it all just melted away. It was a moment of connection between a father and a son and all that had been building up, all that had been stewing, all the frustration, the stress, all the minutia of the day to day which hadn’t gone exactly to plan and had cascaded until he couldn’t see past the negative, in a moment it was all gone.

Those words of love, words of grace, spoken by this child, broke down all of the stuff that we all, could so easily get wrapped up in. It’s no wonder Jesus said to us, “let the little children come to me and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

I can remember clearly, just over ten years ago, coming onto our campus for the first time. I was here for a job conversation with Rev. Patricia. I use the word conversation because at the time I didn’t know it was a job interview. So I showed up with my button down shirt untucked, my hair was a mess, and I wearing jeans which I’m pretty sure had a hole in them.

Nevertheless, I walked onto this campus and into the courtyard when I looked up at the mezzanine at this banner, a deep blue banner, with these bright white words which read, ‘Be the Hope.’ I paused for a moment and as I looked at this banner, I thought to myself, I wonder what his means for this congregation? I wonder what it means for this people? I had no idea, no idea what God was getting me into.

I had no idea how many baptisms we would celebrate together, infants, children, teenagers and adults. Even up to this very day where we celebrate and give thanks for the gift of God’s overflowing love for Amelia Rose and we welcome her into the family of faith the church.

Amelia Rose you will be blessed by this loving community of faithful people who will walk with you as you grow in God’s love and as you learn to love others. And one day soon you too will participate in the baptism of another person and you will renew your baptismal vows along with the rest of this beloved community as together we experience the power of God’s sanctifying grace,

the grace of God that keeps us on the path of love following Jesus, that grace of God that binds us to one another despite our shortcomings, despite our challenges, despite the minutia of life that weighs us down or

dampers our hope. The love of God in our baptism which names us and claims us, which call us a beloved child of the most high God.

I had no idea how many service project trips I would lead and participate in. No idea how this congregation, inspired by Jesus' call to serve the poor and forgotten, would rally, empower and send teams of youth and adults all over this nation and around this world.

From putting up insulation in a double wide trailer in the mountains of Tennessee, to installing a new floor in a kitchen in Slidell Louisiana, from organizing bucket lines of sand and gravel to make cement in Sobier, Haiti, to playing hide and go seek with a group of Native American children in Klamath, Oregon. I have seen and witnessed the presence of Jesus in and through all who have given themselves in loving service on this journey of discipleship. And together, by God's grace, we have made a difference in this world.

Folks in Haiti have access to medical care, families in Appalachia have a warm dry house, a congregation in New Orleans is worshiped this very morning in a sanctuary we helped to build. But we also have come to know and humbly recognize that it's not about what God does through just one of us as an individual or even as a single congregation, but it's about what God does through all of us, through the whole body of Christ in this world.

I had no idea how many saints of the church we would commend to God's everlasting care, how many memorial service and funerals we would walk through together. These moment in the life of our community where we come together and just sit with each other in the pain and the mourning, without trying to make it alright or better, resisting that urge to say something to ease the grief or relieve the burden. I have witnessed the depths of your Christian love and care for one another; from the power of prayer to the power of a homemade casserole delivered to a family who just doesn't have the will or strength to cook for themselves.

Friends, I have seen you minister to each other and walk with each other through the valley of the shadow of death, carrying that belief that nothing can or will ever separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, nothing in life or in death, you carried it for those who just couldn't carry it for themselves.

I had no idea how many times we would gather around this table of God's abundant life-giving love and celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion together. How many times we would pray that God would pour out God's Holy Spirit upon us all making us one with Christ and one with each other and one in ministry to all the world.

I had no idea how many times I would receive that precious gift of serving communion to our children who come up each month to receive the bread and the wine. They get it way more than us adults do most of the time. I remember one sacred morning when I was giving the cup of the new covenant to one of our little ones and I said, 'as you drink this juice remember that God loves you so much,' and she looked at me with all the confidence in the world and she said, 'Oh I know.'

I had no idea how many bounce houses and BBQ's, how many fairs and festivals and cake walks. I had no idea that there would be a dunk tank for the associate pastors. Notice how I said associate pastors, I guess there are some perks to being the senior pastor. I had no idea how much fun we would have together, all of the laughter and joy we would experience just being together, bound to one another in this world for no other reason except for Jesus. I just have no idea.

I wonder if the early church had any idea of what they were getting themselves into when they joined this movement of love? I was thinking about the Corinthians, the small group of Christians living in a place called Corinth all those generations ago. I wondered if they had any inkling of what was come or if they knew that the story of their community would become part of our sacred texts and serve as an inspiration and a challenge for Christians generation upon generation upon generation.

Just think of all of the folks across time who have heard a sermon preached on this passage or participated in a Bible study on this passage, or read this passage as part of their devotional life. I'm fairly certain that the early Christians in Corinth had no idea what they were walking into, no idea that their story, no matter how flawed and broken and totally human, would make such a difference in this world.

Because make no mistake about it, the story of the Corinthian Church is the story of every church. It was populated with ordinary everyday kind of people. Beautiful, flawed people who had strayed from the way of Jesus, the way of love and forgiveness. See the Corinthian Church was a church that was divided by ego and personalities. One preacher I heard recently put it this way he said, "The Corinthian community was a fractured community because everyone was following their own Super Apostles."

See the Corinthians were putting their faith and their hope in the wrong thing; they were trusting a little bit too much in all the charismatic personalities that had emerged among them. Some folks were following one personality, some other were following another personality, and others yet another. They had lost sight of the thing that tied them all together, the love of God in Jesus Christ.

And Paul, who was one of the leaders in the early church, was writing this letter to the Corinthians to remind them of why they got together in the first place. He wrote to remind them that they are called to do life together in the way of Jesus, to grow in love following Jesus, to be grounded and rooted in Jesus first and always, despite all of the fancy, articulate, charismatic preachers that will come and go and come and go and come and go. Paul urges the community remember that we as Christians believe that principles matter more than personalities. And Paul wrote:

"We also believe and so we speak, because we know that the God who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. So we do not lose heart, even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day."

God will raise us with Jesus and bring us into the presence of pure unconditional love. Don't lose heart, stick with it, no matter what. Because this journey, this journey of life, that has twists and turns and endings and new beginnings, this journey where you sometimes find yourself in places where you feel like you just want to stew in a hot mess of frustration, anger, and even despair.

Sometimes in this journey of life you just feel like you want to give up and give in because it's just too much, there's just too much. Sometimes it takes a voice speaking to us, from the outside or inside, which says, don't lose heart, just be the hope.

As this community experiences the transition which lies ahead. I wanted to share some of my hopes for all of you. I hope that you will all keep trying new things, keep stretching yourselves to create new spaces for new people to come and experience the richness of this life done together in Christian community. Keep doing new things even when it's hard or it feels like there just isn't enough. In fact do more new things during those seasons. Because this gospel that we have, this good news of God's healing love in Jesus Christ is just what this world needs.

So along those lines, don't be afraid of failure. Go ahead and fail. Remember, as Mother Teresa once said, "God doesn't call us to be successful, just to be faithful." We don't have to judge ourselves on the world's standards, just by God's.

Lastly, love one another, and your next pastor, the way you have loved me. The depth of love you have shown me and my family is astounding. I cherish the time that we've shared together. You've forgiven me when I've made mistakes, you've welcomed me into your home, into your families and into the most holy and intimate moments of your lives, you've shared yourselves with me, you've trusted me and allowed me to be your pastor. You even laughed at my terrible jokes from time to time.

My life as a Christian and as a pastor has been made so rich in love by you, by each and every one of you. That love you shared with me is just too good for me not to share with another. Embrace your next pastor as you embraced me.

As I transition into this next phase of life in ministry with my family, these words from Paul in his letter to the Philippians came to mind, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." Friends, beloved in Jesus Christ, Be the Hope. Amen.