

“The Greatest of These...”
 August 20, 2017
 Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
 Pastor Bill Chadwick

The apostle Paul in his wonderful LOVE passage, I Corinthians 13, concludes with the famous words, “Faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is ...love.” Certainly love is the greatest, but right now, my friends, I think the Church, and the world, need hope. HOPE. Charlottesville, Barcelona, climate change, earthquake, personal crises, anxiety and depression....The litany goes on.

HOPE

What the world needs now is hope, sweet hope.

And today we have with us a singing group entitled “HOPE RISING”! Not a coincidence.

The scriptures from one end to the other declare with confidence the words, “Fear not!” “Fear not,”...why? “...for I am with you.”

And therefore we have hope.

We bring you words of hope, my friends. In our songs, in our prayers, in some stories during the homily time.

HOPE

How many of you use your cell phone as your alarm in the morning? And then for most of us our phones automatically give us up-to-the-minute news. Which is generally not pleasant. What a horrible way to begin the day.

Let me offer two gentle suggestions. The first is the example of Bill Cross. At the Men’s Prayer breakfast each week when it is Bill’s turn to pray he starts this way, “Lord, thanks for waking me up this morning.”

Second suggestion. Instead of starting with the bad news of the day, start with a word of hope from the Presbyterian Mission Yearbook. The long-standing Mission Yearbook of Prayer has gone entirely digital. Which is wonderful in that the daily stories can be longer than one page and they can be completely current. I HIGHLY commend to you the Mission Yearbook of the Presbyterian Church. I read it almost

every morning and I guarantee you, that if you read it each day for a month you will fall in love with the Presbyterian Church, for you, through your financial gifts and your prayers, are doing such hope-giving things across this country and around the globe. You can google it and then sign up to receive it by daily email.

What sorts of things will you find? In addition to daily Bible verses there is each day an uplifting story of what the Presbyterian Church is doing around the world.

The story for August 2 was about **Synod School** that Pastors Mary Koon and Deb DeMeester attended. In fact, a lovely photo of Deb accompanied that day's story. (slide #12) A record 700 people from 5 months of age to over 90 attended the school in Buena Vista, Iowa from July 23-28, to come together in worship, study, conversation, dance, games. Over 100 teenagers participated.

On August 11 we read of the work **of reconciliation going on in the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda** where 23 years ago hatred between Hutu and Tutsi tribal groups led to the death of more than 800,000 Rwandans. Although it has been more than two decades, the wounds are still very much alive. Church leaders bring together victims and perpetrators of violence to offer and receive forgiveness and to be an example to the younger generation. Hope!

On August 14 we learned that the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has battled **Ebola virus breakouts** more than any other country in the world, with 32% of the global outbreaks recorded there. Since the first outbreak in 1995, Presbyterian mission co-worker Dr. Larry Sthreshley (slide 13) has worked on the front lines of the fight to crush the deadly epidemic and save lives.

August 5 the narrative was about India and the stress on farmers. Since 1995, suicide has affected more than 300,000 farmers in India, according to government census records.

“Farmers were told to buy corporate-produced seeds because they were told the seeds would be better. Farmers bought them not realizing they would have to buy more pesticides. One pesticide led to another and as a result, a lot of farmers got trapped in a cycle of debt and couldn't dig out.”

For several decades, the **Presbyterian Hunger Program (PHP)** has been supporting local communities around the world that are trying to move away from corporately controlled seeds and return to a traditional seed model of saving and sharing. (slide 14) Rural farmers in India are celebrating the certification of the first fully organic

farming community in the state of Rajasthan. In addition, with PHP support, Rajasthan's first women farmer-run production company and heritage seed saving center was established.

Nelson Mandela famously said, "**Education** is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Historically, (slide 15) Presbyterians are BIG on education. We have for over 100 years provided schools around the world and we continue to do so. One year ago today the story in the Mission Yearbook was about a young indigenous man from Lesotho, a poverty-stricken country entirely encircled by South Africa. This young man, John Matlosa, one of three children of a single mom, was educated through Presbyterian Church support and is today a leading auditor in his country.

On that subject of education, moving from the Mission Yearbook to a global reason for hope. A higher percentage of people, especially women, are literate today than ever before in history.

World literacy rates. (slide 16) Northern Africa and the Middle East have drastically improved literacy in just one generation. Literacy leads to better financial security, better health, lower birth rates, less domestic violence, the list goes on.

(At this point in the sermon Nathan Hirsh shared a brief reason for hope. He is participating in weddings 8 out of 9 weekends this summer/fall. People fall in love, commit themselves to one another, and we celebrate that !)

Reasons for hope in the fight against climate change. These were compiled by Sierra Magazine.

Nine out of 14 populations of humpback whales have recovered enough to be removed from the endangered-species list.

Concentrations of toxic mercury in Bluefin tuna are declining, apparently because so many coal-fired power plants have closed.

In China, solar photovoltaic capacity doubled in 2016.

Wind electricity in Texas now supplies 45% of that state's total electricity demand.

Solar jobs in the US increased by 25% in 2016, wind jobs by 32 %.

Solar panels were the largest source of new US electric capacity in 2016.

Four final giant reasons for hope:

When I was a teenager, during the height of the struggle for Civil Rights, Oak Grove invited a group of young African-Americans to talk about their lives. In the question-and-answer time following their presentation, Steve St. Martin, Jr., then a senior in high school asked, “What can we as individuals do to for equality among the races?”

The answer, which I’ve obviously not forgotten in all these decades, “Don’t raise little bigots.” Don’t raise little bigots.

The children I know, in my family and in the Oak Grove family, are indeed NOT bigots. Not with regard to race, gender or sexual orientation. Huge progress in 50 years.

Second giant reason for hope. According to the United Nations, across the planet, **the number of people living in extreme poverty has dropped by more than half in the last 25 years.** (In 1990 1.9 billion people lived on under \$1.25 a day, compared to 836 million in 2015).

Third, the world is getting safer, even if it doesn’t necessarily feel like it. A recent report from the Human Security Report Project, reports **that per capita deaths from war since the 1950s, have declined by how many times would you guess? 25 TIMES!** to by far the lowest rate in human history.

(Read more: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/globally-deaths-war-and-murder-are-decline-180950237/#tjXm1ljhKIWgbhu1.99>)

Give the gift of Smithsonian magazine for only \$12! <http://bit.ly/1cGUiGv>

Follow us: @SmithsonianMag on Twitter)

Final reason for hope: **the Resurrection.** A good friend of mine, after 13 years of marriage and two very young sons, suddenly, entirely without warning, was left by her husband. She was, of course, devastated and desolate. One of her friends comforted her with these words, “Mary, if God can bring Easter out of Good Friday, then God can bring you through this as well.” That was powerfully encouraging for her. And indeed God did bring her through that wrenching time.

Remember friends, where we began. The word of the Lord, for this and every day, “Fear not,” for I am with you.” Ultimately, our trust is in the One who holds history in her loving embrace.

Hope wins.