

The Practice of Hope

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, February 19, 2023, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#)

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I stopped watching the TV news years ago. That hasn't protected me from learning about the bad news. You know the headlines as well as I do. The death toll from the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria has surpassed 46,000 and continues to rise.¹ It feels as if nowhere in the USA is safe from gun violence – a feeling that is probably very accurate. A 149-car train (one car shorter than the number that would have made it officially a “very long train”) transporting highly toxic materials derailed in East Palestine, Ohio,² on February 3, creating a major environmental disaster the extent of which we do not yet know.³ Racism and transphobia and the limitations of women's rights keep getting pushed in subtle and overt legislation across the country. Researchers have noticed that ocean waters warmed by climate change are severely undercutting the Thwaites glacier in West Antarctica, which only matters if you care about catastrophic sea level rise.⁴

It's not simply that the news is overwhelming that makes me want to throw up my hands and say, “I give up!” It's that these problems seem so unsurmountable. I can't stop the earthquakes and aftershocks. While the majority of Americans want some sensible gun restrictions, the elected – I don't know what to call them; ammophiles? – appear to be unwilling to take action. Corporations keep skirting the spirit of the regulations as they pursue increased profits at all non-monetary costs. The isms of our society run so deep it feels as if they will never be overcome. And political officials seem unwilling to make the hard decisions that are necessary to fully mitigate the climate crisis.

It feels like we're on an indivertible path to a scene from a dystopian movie.

“But,” author and activist Naomi Klein says, “I don't believe we have the luxury of throwing up our hands and saying: ‘We're doomed, let's just go Mad Max on this.’ I think there are ways of preparing for those shocks, that build a way of living with one another that is significantly kinder and more generous than the way we currently live with one another, which is really quite brutal. That requires investing in the labour of care at every level, and guaranteeing basic economic rights, like the right to housing, food and clean

¹ “Earthquake death toll surpasses 46,000 in Syria, Turkey,” *Aljazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/18/earthquake-death-toll-surpasses-46000-in-syria-turkey> (posted and accessed 18 February 2023).

² Peter Eavis and Mark Walker, “Norfolk Southern's Profits and Accident Rates Rose in Recent Years,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/17/business/energy-environment/norfolk-southern-derailment-safety.html> (posted 17 February 2023; accessed 18 February 2023).

³ Christine Hauser, “After the Ohio Train Derailment: Evacuations, Toxic Chemicals and Water Worries,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/ohio-train-derailment.html> (posted 17 February 2023; accessed 18 February 2023).

⁴ Chris Mooney, “Warming seas are carving into glacier that could trigger sea level rise,” *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/02/15/glacier-ice-melt-ocean-warming/> (posted and accessed 15 February 2023).

water. If we build out that infrastructure, we can weather shocks with far greater grace. That's where I place my hope."⁵

It's almost as if Klein heard my sermon two weeks ago when I talked about hope needing *pathway thinking*, the thinking that sees pathways to desired outcomes, and *agency thinking*, the sense of empowerment and motivation (agency) to pursue those outcomes.⁶ Hope is a muscle that needs to be exercised.

And that's what today's sermon is about: some ways to exercise hope, some ways to practice hope.

MaryAnn McKibben Dana, the author of the book that inspired this little series, suggests that one way to practice hope is to notice or create beauty. Dana says, "when I'm neglecting beauty, I'm disconnected from the natural world, and/or from art, music, or story – forces that were here before me and will be here after me.

"Some years ago, the pastor and writer Samuel Wells found himself in one of those 'what would you put on your tombstone' types of conversations. He recalls blurting out an idea that arrived fully formed, one of those thoughts he didn't know he had until he heard it in his own voice: If it can't be happy, make it beautiful."⁷

Dana posits that creating beauty or noticing beauty is a way of practicing hope even in the midst of despair or great sadness. I'm not sure I completely agree with her. I do find noticing or creating beauty to be helpful when I'm experiencing sadness, ennui, even despair. I wouldn't, however, say that it builds hope. Rather, I find that noticing and creating beauty brings me peace. That peace, on the other hand may be the ground for hope.

Another way Dana says we can practice hope is by being attentive to relationships. I add to that, by being attentive to community.

"When I'm neglecting relationships" Dana writes, "I see others as burdens or obstacles, or myself as a 'doing' machine.

"Studies show that when we are lonely, our cortisol (stress hormone) levels can soar to similar levels as when we're experiencing a physical attack."⁸ That changes when we pay attention to others, when we nurture to relationships, when we tend to the communities of which we are a part.

"It's one of the most magical paradoxes of life that doing something for someone else can help us feel better about ourselves – and feel better, *period*. But sometimes the despair can rob us of that kind of energy. In those moments, it's a gift to rely on others for a chat or just silent company."⁹

⁵ Naomi Klein in an interview with Madeleine de Trenquallye, " 'It's inequality that kills': Naomi Klein on the future of climate justice," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/feb/13/its-inequality-that-kills-naomi-klein-on-the-future-of-climate-justice> (posted 13 February 2023; accessed 18 February 2023).

⁶ MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *Hope: A User's Manual* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2022), 12.

⁷ *Ibid*, 133.

⁸ *Ibid*, 134

⁹ *Ibid*, 134

Speaking about strategies for advancing the work of climate justice, Klein seems to agree: “I think the most important thing is to just find other people. Trying to think through this by yourself is a recipe for feeling like a failure and getting dispirited very, very quickly. The benefit of being part of a broader movement is knowing that some people are doing some things, and other people are doing other things, and nobody has to do everything.

“I always tell students to find a movement you feel comfortable in, make sure it’s interlinked with other movements, and then work in coalition as broadly as you possibly can.

“And then marry your passion with need. Whatever you want to do, find a way to connect it with the climate crisis. Maybe it’s art, maybe it’s engineering, maybe it’s planning – it’s all needed. I don’t think people need to give up what they’re passionate about to tackle climate change. I think they need to figure out how to connect what they’re passionate about with the climate crisis. Because this is the work of our lifetimes.”¹⁰

And this brings us to what I think is the most important way to practice hope: action. When we act, we claim our own power, and claiming our own power is an important part of *agency thinking*. “Gregory Ellison, activist and professor at Emory University, likes to quote his auntie, who’d say, ‘Greg, I may not be able to change the world, but I can change the three feet around me.’”¹¹

And I believe we can change more than the three feet around us. I believe we can cause changes that have a much more far-reaching impact. Think about every sci-fi movie or TV show you’ve ever seen that involves time travel. One premise of all those movies is that, if you go back in time, you have to be careful about what you do because any little thing you do in the past could cause major changes to the present. Well, if a little thing done in the past can cause major changes in the present, then the things we do, no matter how little they seem to be, can cause major changes in the future. That’s why I find that taking action is the best way for me to practice hope.

Here's what contemporary prophet Greta Thunberg says about hope coming from action: “To me, hope is not about pretending that everything will be fine. It is not about sticking your head in the sand or listening to fairy tales about non-existent technological solutions. It’s not about loopholes or clever accounting. Hope is not something that is given to you. It is something you have to earn, to create. It cannot be gained passively, through standing by and waiting for someone else to do something. Hope is taking action. It is stepping outside of your comfort zone. And if a bunch of school kids were able to get millions of people to go out on the streets and start changing their lives, just imagining what we could all do together, if we really tried. So, instead of looking for hope, start creating it yourself.”¹²

¹⁰ Klein, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Dana, *op. cit.*, 135.

¹² Greta Thunberg, in a tweet <https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg/status/1582758347710771200>, posted and accessed on 19 October 2022.

Bill McKibben has said that there are two types of hope, what he calls *magical hope* and *actual hope*.¹³ Magical hope can take many forms – from Pollyanna wishful thinking to denial of reality to a belief that actions that defy physics will save the day. Actual hope, Bill says, “lies ... with people joining together to make change, despite the insistence of our betters that change is impossible. It’s always been so.”

That’s why my contribution to One Great Hour of Sharing and Week of Compassion (which is next month’s special offering) will make a difference for those affected by the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. That’s why joining an effort like March for our Lives or Brady: United Against Gun Violence can make a difference. That’s why supporting efforts by environmental and workers groups to make our transportation systems safer can make a difference. That’s why uniting with organizations that are combatting racism and transphobia and sexism make a difference. That’s why joining actions sponsored by group like 350.org and Third Act addressing the climate crisis makes a difference.

None of us can do it all, but all of us can do something, and in that doing, we are practicing hope.

Amen.

¹³ Bill McKibben, “Magical Hope vs Actual Hope,” *The Crucial Year*, <https://billmckibben.substack.com/p/magical-hope-vs-actual-hope> (posted and accessed 2 November 2022).