

Romans 5:1-5
“Getting to Hope”
July 24, 2011 Maple Grove UMC

So we’ve talked about a future with hope. And we’ve talked about investing in hope. Here’s today’s question. How do you *get* to hope? Well, “to get to hope,” writes Kathleen Norris, “turn off U.S. Highway 12 at Keldron, South Dakota. It’s easy to miss, as the town is not much more than a gas station and general. . .

“Turn onto the gravel section-line road and look for a wooden map on your right. [T]he Keldron map consists of wooden slats painted with names and numerical inscriptions. Peterson 8S 4E 1N indicates that you would drive eight miles south, four miles east, and one mile north to find the Peterson ranch.

“The small metal sign for Hope (13S) may or may not be up. The wind pulls it down and it can be a while before someone notices and reattaches it. But you don’t need directions; just follow the road south and turn when it turns 90 degrees west, then another 90 degrees south, and then it’s just another mile or so. . .

“You will pass a few modest homes and farm-buildings along the way, some in use, others in disrepair. The most recently abandoned, a classic two-story farmhouse, has boarded-up windows

and an extensive but weed-choked corral. A house abandoned years ago is open to the elements, all its windows and most of its shingles gone. . .

“‘Hope Presbyterian Church is located by itself on the South Dakota prairie,’ is what the church history says. But that doesn’t begin to tell it.”¹

That’s the beginning of a chapter called “Getting to Hope” in Kathleen Norris’ wonderful book, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. I share it with you today not only because it reminds me of the Kansas prairie of my childhood, but also because it beautifully makes my point for today: GETTING TO HOPE IS NOT EASY! And to get there, you’ve got to go through some pretty tough terrain.

Oh, I know, there are people—maybe you know some of them?—who are just always positive and upbeat, who see the silver lining in every cloud and who always look on the bright side of life. If their dog died, they’d find some way to put a positive spin on it. You know the people I mean.

I hate those people. . . No, I don't really hate them, of course. But let's just say that for me, at any rate, hope is not that easy. For me, for a lot of people, I think--and in particular for the apostle Paul in Romans 5—hope isn't something you just happen to have; hope is something you have to *get* to. “Not only that,” he writes, “but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts.” Here, then, is the way to hope: from suffering to endurance, from endurance to character, and finally from character to hope. It is, in fact, some pretty tough terrain.

Now, even though hope is something you have to get to, that doesn't mean you have to get there yourself. The source of all hope, the ground of all confidence, is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It may be a long journey to hope, but hope does not disappoint us. Why? Because the love of God has been poured into our hearts. Because Christian hope is rooted in the victory of Christ, our hope is not merely the prospect of what *might* happen in the future, it is the prospect of what is *guaranteed* by the cross.² As the

hymn has it, “my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”

Many people believe, and some experience, that hope is challenged, even shattered, by suffering and adversity—that if you don’t get the job you’ve been looking for, if your health doesn’t improve the way you prayed for, if your loved one dies instead of getting better, it’s occasion to give up, to give in, to lose faith in God. I confess that I have that tendency.

But not so Romans 5. For Paul, far from challenging hope, suffering is actually the way to hope. Suffering, you might say, is the school of hope. So powerful is God’s love, even things that would seem to work against hope only serve to make it stronger.³ Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

Hope, for Paul, is not a mood and it’s not a feeling. Hope, he says, is a form of *knowing*—*knowing* that we have peace with God, *knowing* that suffering leads to endurance and character and hope, *knowing* that God’s love has been poured into our hearts. Hope is a

sort of stubborn knowing these things, despite all the other things the world wants to you to know. Hope is something you get to.

I learned about this kind of hope from Paul Steinke,⁴ who facilitated support groups for people with AIDS back when that disease was even more deadly than it is today. He tells the experience of Adrian, one of the men in his group. Adrian never doubted the ultimate hope—salvation. But for Adrian, hope was not focused on eternity. He exhibited a living hope that nourished, sustained and strengthened him every day.

At first Adrian thought of hope as optimism, positive thinking. But he kept getting sicker, and sicker. He came back to the group after being hospitalized one time and related how he had sweated in his bed at night listening to the man with AIDS dying in the next bed. On his arm, Adrian received a tattoo of Christ on the cross with an angel on either side. “It came to me as my roommate and I lay suffering that even the angels could not keep Jesus from suffering. How could I expect not to suffer? Don’t get me wrong, I still have hope—hope with suffering and sadness.” Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

As a pastor, one of the things I have learned is the difference between “cheering people up” *from* their suffering and being a hopeful presence to people *in* their suffering. “Too often,” Steinke writes, “pastoral care consists of reassuring people: “I feel awful, pastor.” “Well, things will get better.” But if hope is to grow and flourish, he writes, “it begins with the recognition that sometimes life *is* awful, that pain is unbearable. And God is in it anyway. Hope grows,” he says, “in suffering.” Hope is something you get to.

Maya Angelou wrote the famous poem, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”:

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Free birds have less need of hope. Caged birds sing, I profess, because in Christ freedom, though not yet seen, is already won. The caged bird sings because it *knows* that suffering leads to endurance, character and hope, and that hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured into our hearts.

Kathleen Norris' chapter on "Getting to Hope" ends like this: [One former minister at the Hope Church] "told me that she couldn't imagine what was happening at the first funeral service she conducted for a member of Hope Church when, as people gathered for the graveside service, the men, some kneeling, began studying the open grave. It was early November, and someone explained that they were checking the frost and moisture levels in the ground. They were farmers and ranchers worried about a drought. They were mourners giving a good friend back to the earth. They were people of the earth," she writes, "looking for a sign of hope."⁵

Hope, real hope, is something you get to, and the way lies through some pretty rough terrain--through suffering and endurance

and character. Hope, real hope, is hard to get to. But it will get you through anything.

¹ from "Getting to Hope," in Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 160-61.

² see Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 134.

³ See Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, Interpretation (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1985), 91.

⁴ See Paul Steinke, "Pastoral Notes on AIDS and Hope," *The Christian Century* (May 20-27, 1992), 533-534.

⁵ Norris, 176.