

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Seventeenth Sunday of Pentecost/Ordinary Time – September 11, 2016
15th Anniversary of 9/11/2001
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 15:1-10

For Reflection

“Hope is an act of desperate defiance against monstrous odds.”

— Ivo Andrić, Bosnian Chronicle
(1892–1975) Yugoslav[a] novelist, poet and short story writer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1961

**"Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road,
but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence."**

~ Lin Yutang (1895–1976) Chinese writer, translator, linguist and inventor.

Hundred to One

Shepherds in the Middle East – who have practiced their trade in the same way for thousands of years – will tell you that a herd of 100 sheep would never have only one shepherd. Therefore, if one sheep strays – there are other herders to watch the 99.

But that wasn't the point Jesus was trying to make – at least not the one most scholars THINK he was trying to make. Jesus tended toward the hyperbolic. He exaggerated to make his point. Other shepherds were not relevant. Our attention (as the 99 sheep) should be on the lost sheep – because it could have been any of us – hundred to one chance. And our attention should be on the shepherd – G-d, the Heart of the Universe – who comes looking for us and will carry us home – if we can hold out HOPE – and survive the journey.

And it behooves us to hold out HOPE and be survivors – because that is what got us here in the first place. American Egyptian poet Suzy Kassem puts it this way in a poem entitled: REMEMBER YOUR GREATNESS

Before you were born,
And were still too tiny for
The human eye to see,
You won the race for life
From among 250 million competitors.
And yet,
How fast you have forgotten
Your strength,

When your very existence
Is proof of your greatness.
You were born a winner,
A warrior,
One who defied the odds
By surviving the most gruesome
Battle of them all.
And now that you are a giant,
Why do you even doubt victory
Against smaller numbers,
And wider margins?
The only walls that exist,
Are those you have placed in your mind.
And whatever obstacles you conceive,
Exist only because you have forgotten
What you have already
Achieved.”

— Suzy Kassem, Rise Up and Salute the Sun: The Writings of Suzy Kassem
(b.1975) American writer, film director, philosopher, author, and poet of Egyptian heritage.

It's miraculous that we even exist – let alone made it this far. It behooves us to take what life we've been given, cherish it, grow it in the petri-dish of our village and culture, examine it, re-create it, celebrate it, share it with others – with as much gentleness and kindness as we can muster in this precarious world.

Fifteen years ago when four planes were used as weapons and thousands died – we were all symbolically put on notice. 9/11 was an attack on complacency – and every person in this country and on this planet was notified that we are mortal – evil is random – life is precious and fragile. It could have been us – hundred to one change – on those planes, in those buildings. And what would we have done under the circumstances?

There were millions of choices made that day. Some people ran toward the danger to help – others ran the opposite direction (I'm certain that would have been my choice). Many of those who were going to die had a choice about how that would happen – some subdued hijackers in order to save lives beyond their own – some called loved ones to say good-bye – some let death come for them in various horrific forms – some decided to fly and leapt from the towers.

Their lives were as miraculous as our own – and each of them held out hope as best they could – until G-d came to carry them home. And we are the ones left to continue their legacy – live to the fullest – make the best choices possible knowing we are going to die – eventually.

We can choose how to live this day because we still have breath in us. We can choose to retrench in fear, lash out with hatred, incarcerate our suspicions, excommunicate any one different from ourselves. We can also choose to welcome the stranger, trust in the goodness of the human heart, learn from differences, walk the road of common decency until it actually exists.

There are ways in which hope and kindness breed more hope and kindness. Many stories have come out over the last 15 years that confirm that fact. This is one (confirmed by Snopes to be true) from a flight attendant on Delta Flight 15 headed for New York:

On the morning of Tuesday, September 11, we were about 5 hours out of Frankfurt, flying over the North Atlantic. All of a sudden the curtains parted and I was told to go to the cockpit, immediately, to see the captain.

As soon as I got there I noticed that the crew had that “All Business” look on their faces. The captain handed me a printed message. It was from Delta’s main office in Atlanta and simply read, “All airways over the Continental United States are closed to commercial air traffic. Land ASAP at the nearest airport. Advise your destination.” No one said a word about what this could mean. We knew it was a serious situation and we needed to find terra firma quickly. The captain determined that the nearest airport was 400 miles behind us in Gander, Newfoundland. He requested approval for a route change from the Canadian traffic controller and approval was granted immediately — no questions asked. We found out later, of course, why there was no hesitation in approving our request.

While the flight crew prepared the airplane for landing, another message arrived from Atlanta telling us about some terrorist activity in the New York area. A few minutes later word came in about the hijackings. We decided to LIE to the passengers while we were still in the air. We told them the plane had a simple instrument problem and that we needed to land at the nearest airport in Gander, Newfoundland, to have it checked out. We promised to give more information after landing in Gander. There was much grumbling among the passengers, but that’s nothing new! Forty minutes later, we landed in Gander. Local time at Gander was 12:30 PM that’s 11:00 AM EST.

There were already about 20 other airplanes on the ground from all over the world that had taken this detour on their way to the US. After we parked on the ramp, the captain made the following announcement: “Ladies and gentlemen, you must be wondering if all these airplanes around us have the same instrument problem as we have. The reality is that we are here for another reason.” Then he went on to explain the little bit we knew about the situation in the US. There were

loud gasps and stares of disbelief. The captain informed passengers that Ground control in Gander told us to stay put. The Canadian Government was in charge of our situation and no one was allowed to get off the aircraft. No one on the ground was allowed to come near any of the air crafts. Only airport police would come around periodically, look us over and go on to the next airplane.

In the next hour or so more planes landed and Gander ended up with 53 airplanes from all over the world, 27 of which were US commercial jets. Meanwhile, bits of news started to come in over the aircraft radio and for the first time we learned that airplanes were flown into the World Trade Center in New York and into the Pentagon in DC. People were trying to use their cell phones, but were unable to connect due to a different cell system in Canada. Some did get through, but were only able to get to the Canadian operator who would tell them that the lines to the U.S. were either blocked or jammed.

Sometime in the evening the news filtered to us that the World Trade Center buildings had collapsed and that a fourth hijacking had resulted in a crash. By now the passengers were emotionally and physically exhausted, not to mention frightened, but everyone stayed amazingly calm. We had only to look out the window at the 52 other stranded aircraft to realize that we were not the only ones in this predicament.

We had been told earlier that they would be allowing people off the planes one plane at a time. At 6 PM, Gander airport told us that our turn to deplane would be 11 am the next morning. Passengers were not happy, but they simply resigned themselves to this news without much noise and started to prepare themselves to spend the night on the airplane. Gander had promised us medical attention, if needed, water, and lavatory servicing. And they were true to their word.

Fortunately, we had no medical situations to worry about. We did have a young lady who was 33 weeks into her pregnancy. We took REALLY good care of her. The night passed without incident despite the uncomfortable sleeping arrangements. About 10:30 on the morning of the 12th a convoy of school buses showed up. We got off the plane and were taken to the terminal where we went through Immigration and Customs and then had to register with the Red Cross. After that we (the crew) were separated from the passengers and were taken in vans to a small hotel. We had no idea where our passengers were going.

We learned from the Red Cross that the town of Gander has a population of 10,400 people and they had about 10,500 passengers to take care of from all the airplanes that were forced into Gander! We were told to just relax at the hotel and we would be contacted when the US airports opened again, but not to expect

that call for a while. We found out the total scope of the terror back home only after getting to our hotel and turning on the TV, 24 hours after it all started.

Meanwhile, we had lots of time on our hands and found that the people of Gander were extremely friendly. They started calling us the “plane people.” We enjoyed their hospitality, explored the town of Gander and ended up having a pretty good time. Two days later, we got that call and were taken back to the Gander airport. Back on the plane, we were reunited with the passengers and found out what they had been doing for the past two days. What we found out was incredible.....

Gander and all the surrounding communities (within about a 75 Kilometer radius) had closed all high schools, meeting halls, lodges, and any other large gathering places. They converted all these facilities to mass lodging areas for all the stranded travelers. Some had cots set up, some had mats with sleeping bags and pillows set up. ALL the high school students were required to volunteer their time to take care of the “guests.”

Our 218 passengers ended up in a town called Lewisporte, about 45 kilometers from Gander where they were put up in a high school. If any women wanted to be in a women-only facility, that was arranged. Families were kept together. All the elderly passengers were taken to private homes. Remember that young pregnant lady? She was put up in a private home right across the street from a 24-hour Urgent Care facility. There was a dentist on call and both male and female nurses remained with the crowd for the duration.

Phone calls and e-mails to the U.S. and around the world were available to everyone once a day. During the day, passengers were offered “Excursion” trips. Some people went on boat cruises of the lakes and harbors. Some went for hikes in the local forests. Local bakeries stayed open to make fresh bread for the guests. Food was prepared by all the residents and brought to the schools. People were driven to restaurants of their choice and offered wonderful meals. Everyone was given tokens for local laundry mats to wash their clothes, since luggage was still on the aircraft. In other words, every single need was met for those stranded travelers.

Passengers were crying while telling us these stories. Finally, when they were told that U.S. airports had reopened, they were delivered to the airport right on time and without a single passenger missing or late. The local Red Cross had all the information about the whereabouts of each and every passenger and knew which plane they needed to be on and when all the planes were leaving. They coordinated everything beautifully. It was absolutely incredible.

When passengers came on board, it was like they had been on a cruise. Everyone knew each other by name. They were swapping stories of their stay, impressing each other with who had the better time. Our flight back to Atlanta looked like a chartered party flight. The crew just stayed out of their way. It was mind-boggling. Passengers had totally bonded and were calling each other by their first names, exchanging phone numbers, addresses, and email addresses.

And then a very unusual thing happened. One of our passengers approached me and asked if he could make an announcement over the PA system. We never, ever allow that. But this time was different. I said “of course” and handed him the mike. He picked up the PA and reminded everyone about what they had just gone through in the last few days. He reminded them of the hospitality they had received at the hands of total strangers. He continued by saying that he would like to do something in return for the good folks of Lewisporte. He said he was going to set up a Trust Fund under the name of DELTA 15 (our flight number). The purpose of the trust fund is to provide college scholarships for the high school students of Lewisporte. He asked for donations of any amount from his fellow travelers. When the paper with donations got back to us with the amounts, names, phone numbers and addresses, the total was for more than \$14,000.

The gentleman, an MD from Virginia, promised to match the donations and to start the administrative work on the scholarship. He also said that he would forward this proposal to Delta Corporate and ask them to donate as well. [Currently] the trust fund is at more than \$1.5 million and has assisted 134 students in college education.

TRUE: <http://www.snopes.com/rumors/gander.asp>

A hundred to one – a million to one – chances are – we won't be here long.

We have choices to make about how we will spend this time.

Perhaps we can choose to add more kindness and goodness and hope to this life.

Perhaps we can choose to fly – if even for a moment...

Luke 15:1-10

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 So he told them this parable: 4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

8 "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

<https://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/tag/911/>

<http://motherboard.vice.com/read/long-fall-the-most-famous-9-11-photo-is-still-suspended>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hope>

Hope is an optimistic attitude of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes related to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large.[1] As a verb, its definitions include: "expect with confidence" and "to cherish a desire with anticipation".[2]

Dr. Barbara L. Fredrickson argues that hope comes into its own when crisis looms, opening us to new creative possibilities.[4] Frederickson argues that with great need comes an unusually wide range of ideas, as well as such positive emotions as happiness and joy, courage, and empowerment, drawn from four different areas of one's self: from a cognitive, psychological, social, or physical perspective.[5] Hopeful people are "like the little engine that could, [because] they keep telling themselves "I think I can, I think I can".[6] Such positive thinking bears fruit when based on a realistic sense of optimism, not on a naive "false hope".[7]

Positive psychologist Charles Richard Snyder's area of work was on hope and forgiveness and the impact that hope can have on aspects of life such as health, work, education, and personal meaning.

Hope Theory postulates that there are three main things that make up hopeful thinking:[15]

Goals – Approaching life in a goal-oriented way.

Pathways – Finding different ways to achieve your goals.

Agency – Believing that you can instigate change and achieve these goals.

Contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty understands hope as more than goal setting, rather as a metanarrative, a story that serves as a promise or reason for expecting a better future. Rorty as postmodernist believes past meta-narratives, including the Christian story, utilitarianism, and Marxism have proved false hopes; that theory cannot offer social hope; and that liberal man must learn to live without a consensual theory of social hope.[36] Rorty says a new document of promise is needed for social hope to exist again.[37]