

“Here’s Hoping”

The First Parish in Wayland, Mass.
The Rev. Ken Sawyer
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Here’s hoping you are feeling well.

Here’s hoping you continue to feel well all year.

Here’s hoping justice will flourish this year, and peace descend on a war-torn world.

Here’s hoping the year will bring joy and wellbeing to you, to all you love, to all beings everywhere.

Here’s hoping environmental awareness, concern, and action will become a passion among the nations and their peoples.

Here’s hoping life here at First Parish will be rich in community, worship, spiritual development, beauty, and devotion.

Here’s hoping.

It is the time of year for such encouraging sentiments, as we toss out the old calendars and post the ones for 2007.

My colleague Patrick O’Neill has an Irish New Year’s blessing:

In the year to come,
May laughter linger in your rooms,
May all your troubles flee with the dawn;
May your friends grow stout,
And may your enemies grow confused;
May your children be quick to visit and slow to leave;
May both your feet tap, and both your lips whistle,
And may your heart never fail you.

Here’s hoping.

Clarke Dewey Wells, whom I have been quoting a lot of late in the aftermath of his death in the fall, has a “Prayer at New Year”-- rather less cheery than Patrick’s, but one that also ends with a reference to the heart. But I need to set it up a little, because the last word in the poem is “swear,” presumably in the sense — and I’m quoting from my dictionary here, because I know how much people like it when ministers quote from the dictionary — “to make a solemn pledge or promise; vow.”

I send no wish to the Impossible
Or prayer to Maybe, Perhaps;
No promise birthing pretense, despair,
Or longing that sighs like a rack.

In a world mad with our choosing
The warfare this year will glare,
And mornings will turn to darkness
And most will be worse for the wear.

So I wish you simply endurance:
Luck among the mines and snares,
Respite for some shining at table
Less pain than you're able to bear;

With this an occasional glance
Into other's eyes that care,
A minimum of broken lances
And a heart still able to swear.

Actually, Clarke being the puckish, sometimes irreverent, sometimes volatile, justice-loving man that he was, one can imagine him hoping for a heart that could not only make solemn promises, but also do some cursing at the evils of the world.

Here's hoping.

"Here's Hoping" — that's the title of this sermon, and it comes with an ambiguity of its own, because it could refer to here, this place, and what we do here. Here is where one can find a form of hoping, here, in this congregation and in this room, where we gather in no small part to elevate our expectations and aspirations, to harbor hope and help keep it alive, even to strengthen it.

I think that is one of the primary functions of a religious home or community, to foster hope. There are other things we come here for: solace sometimes, the provocation of our thinking and our consciences, the beauty of the music, the community itself. But also for hope.

Two things about the hope I think we have to give and take here. One, by hoping I mean more than wishing. I know, I began with a lot of wishing. But often when we do that, as we do, it is not the sort of petitionary prayer that expects some outside agency to pull off a miracle because we asked, nice as that might be. But usually it is hoping as a way of increasing in us the chance of our acting in ways that will bring about what we wish for.

Not petitionary prayers, then, as much as prayers of self-encouragement, and mutual encouragement.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, wrote, "People who pray for miracles usually don't get miracles, any more than children who pray for bicycles, good grades, or boyfriends get them as a result of praying. But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered. They discover that they have more strength, more courage than they ever knew themselves to have." [125]

For Kushner, as for some or many of you, one source of that strength and courage is God. But the other is religious community. I am taking prayer in a very loose sense, as all that happens in our worship that gives form and voice to our hopes for hope, whether hope for comfort or clarity or compassion or for hope itself, for whatever spiritual sustenance will feed the hungers of our hearts, our spirits, our souls, on any given Sunday.

So I resonate when Kushner says, "The first thing prayer does for us is to put us in touch with other people, people who share the same concerns, values, dreams, and pains that we do." [119] It "redeems people from isolation. It assures them that they need not feel alone and abandoned. It lets them know that they are part of a greater reality, with more depth, more hope, more courage, and more of a future than any individual could have by himself [or herself]." [121]

Here, in this place, is that kind of hoping, the hoping that we create in ourselves and each other that we will remember our highest values and act on them, that glorious ideals like love and peace and justice will be more than abstractions but driving forces in our lives.

Before leaving Kushner, I will toss in one story about community that he repeats from the writer Harry Golden. When Golden “was young, he once asked his father, ‘If you don’t believe in God, why do you go to the synagogue so regularly?’ His father answered, ‘Jews go to synagogue for all sorts of reasons. My friend Garfinkle, who is Orthodox, goes to talk to God. I go to talk to Garfinkle.’ [122]

The first point about the hoping we harbor here is, it is mostly about finding strength, courage, wisdom, dedication, and whatever else we may aspire to in ourselves, encouraged by the service and the company. If there is a God that listens and pitches in, well so much the better.

The second thing to note about the hoping that we hope will happen here is, it does not require optimism about the outcome of our actions. Of course, if you are someone who believes with Julian of Norwich that “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all matter of things shall be well,” a medieval quote often cited these days, well again, so much the better for you.

But one could as well echo a Jesuit priest who works with teens in Los Angeles [Gregory Boyle] who was quoted as saying, “I’m hopeful, but I’m not optimistic.”ⁱⁱ You can turn that sentence around — he is not optimistic, he doubts that all shall be well, but he’s hopeful, he goes on hoping.

I have a cartoon in which a person says, “I call it ‘The Power of Positive Pessimism’ ... Knowing full well that things almost always end in disaster, yet finding enjoyment in every step of the process. It works for me!”

Well, that’s going pretty far. As an alternative one might consider the attitude of James Luther Adams, possibly Unitarianism’s foremost twentieth-century theologian. “He embraced what [one writer] would call a ‘chastened optimism.’ [He] was fully aware of the power of radical evil in the world, although he also had a firm and appealing confidence in the ultimate vindication of righteousness, which prevents, as he says in one of his essays, a retreat to nihilism.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Personally, I am somewhere between those two. I don’t have a firm confidence in the ultimate vindication of righteousness, or the confidence of the radical nineteenth-century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker that though the arc of history is long, it bends toward justice. But things don’t almost always end in disaster, either. There is usually reason to remain hopeful. And as I say, I think that’s what here is for, to encourage our hoping, our resistance to nihilism, as improbable as the case for hope often may be.

There is a poem by the Egyptian poet C. P. Cavafy that I have used before, one that stays with me.

THERMOPYLAE

Honor to those who in the life they lead
define and guard a Thermopylae.
Never betraying what is right,
consistent and just in all they do
but showing pity also, and compassion;
generous when they are rich, and when they are poor,
still generous in small ways,
still helping as much as they can;
always speaking the truth,
yet without hating those who lie.

And even more honor is due to them

when they foresee (as many do foresee)
that in the end Ephialtis will make his appearance,
that the Medes will break through after all.

C. P. Cavafy, 1903

Translation by E. Keeley and F. Sherrard

An interesting case can be made that here, that religion, that the effort to create hopefulness, has been a powerful evolutionary force, coaxing people into better behavior than the situation might call for. Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, any of those who have urged us to act with reason and love and compassion, were helping humankind move toward desirable goals by raising hopes that people might behave well, that our hopes and trust might not be delusional — when in fact, they somewhat usually are.

I hope it isn't too big a stretch to relate this to human happiness, which was the subject of a sermon I gave in October. There is one aspect of all the current research into happiness that I didn't get into, which is the positive power of a certain level of wishful thinking. A reviewer noted that one of the many new books on the subject [*Stumbling on Happiness* by Daniel Gilbert] "is a paean to delusion. 'How do we manage to think of ourselves as great drivers, talented lovers and brilliant chefs when the facts of our lives include a pathetic parade of dented cars, disappointed partners and deflated soufflés?' [the author] asks. 'The answer is simple: We cook the facts....'

"What gets us through life, evidently, is just the right amount of delusion — enough to fool us into feeling relatively good about ourselves (as in Lake Wobegon, we all believe ourselves to be above average; 90 percent of drivers certainly do), but not so much as to exceed our own credulity. 'If we were to experience the world exactly as it is, we'd be too depressed to get out of bed in the morning,' he writes. 'But if we experience the world exactly as we want it to be, we'd be too deluded to find our slippers....'

The review concludes that the book provides "yet more evidence that unhappy people have the more accurate view of reality — and that learning how to kid ourselves may be a key to mental health."ⁱⁱⁱ

It may also be the key to healthy church life. Or so it says in the standard textbook for UU students of preaching: "When it comes to religious community, we [preachers] help the congregation will itself into being by the words we use, by the claims we make on their behalf. We do it over and over, every time we celebrate — as if it were already true — the nature of the community we hope to help them become. Members of the congregation share that hope, and they not only allow us to voice the dream again, they probably expect us to."

Still, "The gap between stated communal ideals and reality cannot be so wide as to be ridiculous.... The ideal we claim to exist cannot outreach current fact by more than a reasonable margin."^{iv} I wrote that.

What we have is never quite as perfect as we can hope for. On March 18, we will have a celebration here at First Parish of this religious community and all that it means to us. And it will be not just fun and great but honest and true, even if in fact a few people in the congregation are miffed just then, and others are a little irked, and one or two are feeling deeply unloving. And even if our willingness and ability to love and trust and hope for ourselves, for our country, for our world, that we and they can all be made whole and healthy and good, is not all it could be — or maybe *because* we want to encourage that part of ourselves — we will gather gladly.

Because here, here is hoping.

Here's hoping.

ⁱ Bob Herbert, "L.A.'s Streets of Death," *New York Times*, 6/12/03, p. A33

ⁱⁱ David Little, "Liberalism and World Order: The Thought of James Luther Adams," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Summer 2003, p. 8

ⁱⁱⁱ Scott Stossel, "The Joy of Delusion," *New York Times Book Review*, 5/7/06, p. 16

^{iv} Jane Rzepka and Ken Sawyer, *Thematic Preaching: An Introduction*, p. 137