"Ripples of Hope"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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On a pleasant day a couple weeks ago, a group began to gather on a sidewalk. We stood near a large, blocky building. A tall fence surrounded the perimeter. After a few short speeches and an awkward, but heart-felt song, we began to walk along the perimeter fence. Although we had been warned, I was nonetheless startled when pounding erupted on the windows as we walked by. Although the glare of the late afternoon sun made it impossible for us to see through the windows, the persons inside could see us. And they knew we were there to support them.

We continued to walk along the building for several hundred more yards then ascended a pedestrian bridge that paralleled the building. Now, standing thirty feet up we could look across the distance and over the fence into the windows. Faces appeared. Multiple faces crammed into each window. Handwritten signs on 8 1/2 x 11 sheets of paper were held flat to the window—too far away and too light to be read.

Some within our own group held signs. The largest—a banner held aloft by tall stakes—read, "You are not forgotten," in both English and Spanish. And that was why we were there: to remind the men and women locked inside this detention center that they were not forgotten. We stood together as an interfaith group of multiple ages, genders, and ethnicities to be a message of hope.

A few months ago I began to pay closer attention to issues of immigration and detention. The shift began during my February vacation down South. Not only was I visiting an area of former plantations worked by enslaved persons, I was also listening to audio books about slavery as I drove. One of the books I listened to was the science fiction story, *The Underground Railroad*, by Colson Whitehead. In Whitehead's version, the underground railroad was not a metaphor of transportation, but an actual mechanical train system that ran underground. Some combination of his story and my location made the historic experience of fear and hope come alive for me in a new way.

If you had been alive in 1818, would you have believed that slavery could be outlawed in 50 years? Slavery had always been...had always *legally* been part of the U.S. And before the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery became law in 1865, there would be another law: the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Opponents of slavery could no longer help escaped slaves without risking their own legal consequences.

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And yet, people continued to help. Enslaved persons continued to flee. As history, I fear it may become easy to simply describe such choices as facts, as *fait accompli.* But, as I traveled through the South and listened to these fictionalized accounts of escape, I was struck by the very humanness of it all. Beneath the historical narratives were people making choices, taking risks, and breaking the law. From our historic point of view, we can clearly see the fundamental immorality of slavery and the justification for both escape and helping those who escaped. But, at the time, I imagine there was simply a whole heck of a lot of fear, of despair, and . . . of hope.

In my life, I have never broken the law. Ok, well, maybe that's not *entirely* true . . . admittedly, I can have a bit of a 'lead foot' in driving. But, my point is, I've been raised to be a "good, law-abiding citizen." How about you? So I can't say for certain that in 1850 I would have chosen to harbor persons who had runaway from slavery. Would I have risked the safety of my family, the security of my financial position, or the judgment of my neighbors? And yet, people took these risks. Of course, other persons took the risk of fleeing—illegally crossing boundaries of county, state, and nations in the hope of a better, safer, more just life for themselves and their children.

Reflecting on these risks and choices, fears and hopes of persons in the past, I began to wonder where these same questions and choices show up today. And, this is how I began to think more deeply about immigration. I began to wonder about the circumstances that would cause people to risk fleeing their nation and entering this country without documents. I began to wonder about the calculus of risks that led people to make such choices. What terrors, what traumas, what despair, and what hope might lead a person to try to journey to and live in an unknown place—and to risk doing so without the proper documentation?

And I began to wonder about my role. On the one hand, I value the gift of living in a society ruled by law. On the other hand, how do I respond when the law says its ok to separate a parent from their infant child? How do I respond when the daily food I eat often depends on the labor of persons not legally present in the U.S.? How do I respond when I befriend and care about persons whose choices led them to this country, but whose path did not enable them the possibility of the right documentation to be here legally?

But this is supposed to be a sermon on hope, not immigration. As I reflected on hope, I quickly realized how hope is a concept that can quickly slip into multiple usages. For example, we use 'hope' as a verb linked with a specific desire. We *hope* for a sunny day or we *hope* our kids remember to call us for Mother's Day. Sometimes these hopes can feel small and might even be characterized as 'wishes' for the future. Yet, sometimes, these specific hopes can also feel something like prayer—they name our deep longings for what

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we would like to be. We hope for an end to violence against women. We hope for an end to war. Such hopes convey our visions for the kind of world that we want to live in.

Sometimes hope is also used as an adjective rather than as a verb. We say someone is a hopeful person—suggesting hope as a kind of optimistic attitude rather than being linked to specific things. Sometimes, having a hopeful attitude is not merely a personality aspect, but a deliberate choice. To say one is hopeful reflects a way of being that seeks to see possibilities, that doesn't easily give up, but keeps going even when the way forward is unknown and uncertain.

And, sometimes hope is used as a noun. We have hope. Or, we say of someone that they are without hope. In this sense, hope seems to be something of shape and substance. Something that can be gained or lost. Something that can be given or received.

So what *is* hope? Across these various usages, I hear a refrain of possibility. At its core, I think hope is an expression of our longing to live fully and well. In other words, I think hope is the life force within seeking to connect with the possibilities of Life. And, in this way, hope is about meaning. Hope gives us the possibility that our living will have some meaning. Hope assures us that the struggles and the losses and the fears of life are not all there is to life. Hope connects us with the conviction that there is *good* in this world and that there is *purpose* to our living.

There are times when goodness and purpose can be difficult to see or to believe in. Over these last few years, several of you cited the sermon Ken, our minister emeritus, delivered on hope. An auction sermon purchased by Mary Dunne, Ken was asked to explore when the question to "Got Hope?" is no. For those who may not know, this question arose within the context of Mary and Malcolm's deep grief following the devastating tragedy of the murder of their 18-year old daughter, Lauren.

Among other things, Ken suggested that sometimes other people carry your hope for you. Ken wrote,

> There are times – thank goodness, very, very uncommon times – but times when having hope is more than a person should expect of themselves, times just to get through, step by step, breath by breath, when hope is something people around you, your family and friends, hold for you until you are ready to receive it back.

Sometimes all we can do is make it through this moment. Imagining the next moment, a possible future, is simply too much to bear. There is no room for hope.

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And yet, others carry that hope. Others continue to believe that a day will come when there is space to laugh again, to love again, to believe again in meaningful actions. For hope is the expression of faith in this gift of life. But, I do *not* think hope must believe that everything will *always* be good, or pain-free, or even 'positive.' Rather I think hope believes that life will, in the end, be meaningful.

Standing on that pedestrian bridge across from a wall of faces in windows behind a fence, I thought of Ken's words and what it meant to carry hope for someone. This was not a protest, but a ritual of giving hope. A woman stood with us whose husband was locked inside those walls. And, Victor, a man from Wayland, was behind those walls. These were persons with families who had taken risks and made difficult choices to come to this country—often leaving family and loved ones behind. With no other way to communicate their longings, their fears, or their hopes, they pounded on the windows—the rumble crossing the distance between us and them. On that day, in that place, this is what hope sounded like: fists pounding in response to strangers holding signs, "You are not forgotten."

In 1966, Senator Bobby Kennedy traveled to South Africa in the midst of apartheid. To a crowd of youth, he delivered a speech about the role they could play in determining the future. Naming the inevitable dangers that would threaten their action, Kennedy warned against "the danger of futility; the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills." The tool he suggested to fight against this danger was hope. He wrote,

> Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, [they] send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Hope holds on to the belief in meaningful action, in purposeful life. Our one small action may create just a ripple of hope, but it can become a torrent of change.

Several months ago a colleague chose to visit the Detention Center where she met Victor, a man from Wayland. Hopeful for support, she emailed me to see if First Parish in Wayland could help. Earlier that week, Rachel had expressed her hope to be more involved with social justice issues like immigration. So, I put her in touch with my colleague and Victor's lawyer. Over the last couple weeks, Rachel asked us to write letters of support for Victor—which many of us did. And, on Friday, Victor was released from the Detention Center.

The ripples of hope are real. Through our actions of love and support, of seeking what is good and right, we can create ripples of hopefulness as we move through the world. And if we find that we too find ourselves in a place of tragedy or despair, may we trust that others

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will hold hope for us. Together we can continue to believe that life is a gift. Together we can continue to believe in the possibility of living fully and well . . . of living a meaningful life.

So may it be.
Amen.

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