

January 31, 2010

KEEP ON KEEPING ON

*“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”
Hebrews 10:23*

The middle-aged woman was heartbroken and scared. Her husband of more than twenty years had suddenly died three months before. Now, she had come to church because the grief pains of that loss were eating her up. She said to her pastor, “I still cry a lot, especially late at night. I feel so alone, so afraid, so unable to cope, and so disillusioned. When he died, it seemed like a big part of me died with him. My whole world was wrapped up in him, and how he is gone. What in the world am I going to do? I have faith. I love God and I trust God, but where is God now when I need God so desperately? I know God is out there somewhere, but somehow I feel like I have been jolted out of contact with the Lord.”

All of us, I am sure, can identify with that woman and the despair reflected in her words as she cried out for God. For we have all known painful moments like that. This is the way it feels sometimes. We have faith. We believe. We try to live our faith daily. We trust God. But in spite of that, there are moments in our lives when we seem to lose our grip on life, when faith is hard to hold on to, when God seems far away.

Those difficult moments come for all of us when we feel disillusioned, disappointed, and downhearted. The problem of disillusionment is what I want us to focus on this morning.

There is a very dramatic picture of it in the Gospel of Luke, in the Emmaus road story (See Luke 24:13-35). It is Easter afternoon. Cleopas and Simon know about the crucifixion having taken place, but they have not yet encountered the resurrection. Disappointed, disillusioned, and heartbroken, they trudge down the Emmaus road toward home. Their hopes for the future dashed, they turn back toward the old life.

Picture them in your mind. Their shoulders are slumped. Their heads are bowed as though they carry on their backs a crushing burden of defeat. They walk along in silence. At last, the younger man speaks: “He’s dead; he’s gone; it’s all over. They have killed him, and without him we are nothing. We should have known this wouldn’t work. It was too good to be true. How could we have been

such fools? We followed him. We trusted. We thought he was the one to save us.”

That is the portrait of disillusionment. But we know the rest of the story – how the resurrected Lord comes and walks with them, how they return to Jerusalem to share the good news, and how in the process they too get resurrected. Before that encounter, however, they were disillusioned men.

Now the question is, how do we deal with disillusionment in a productive way? How do we handle disappointments creatively? How do we get “up” when we feel so downcast? How does a broken heart get mended? How do we keep the faith when the going is difficult?

Maida Mickle was a long time missionary in China and Japan. Upon her return to this country she served Centenary College. For twenty years she also taught a popular, well-loved Sunday school class for couples. She was a saint in the church – full of life and wit. She had two favorite sayings, which help us find an answer to the problem of disillusionment. First, she said, “I would rather wear out than rust out!” And second, she said, “We have to keep on keeping on!”

In essence, this was the answer those two disciples found on the Emmaus road: “We can’t quit! We can’t throw in the towel! We have to keep on keeping on!”

Also, this is the way the writer of the book of Hebrews said it. He was writing to a people under heavy persecution. These people were disillusioned. They were scared and confused. They were downcast and heartbroken. The writer knew it, and thus he wrote these words: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful; And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together.but let us encourage one another” (Hebrews 10:23-25).

In other words, the author was saying, “Don’t quit! Don’t give up! Don’t lose heart! Keep on keeping on!” When you feel disillusioned and downhearted, it helps to remember these words from the writer of Hebrews. Let us therefore look at this more closely with three thoughts.

FIRST, WHEN YOU FEEL DISILLUSIONED, DISAPPOINTED, AND DOWNHEARTED, REMEMBER TO KEEP ON LOVING OTHERS. Recall again how the writer of Hebrews put it. He said, “Consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” He is so right. The best

antidote for the poison of despair is to reach out and touch someone else with love. The best way to get over your problem is to get outside yourself, to forget yourself into usefulness. You know, when people come to church and say their faith is dwindling, the question I always want to ask is, “Are you still serving God?” It is hard to lose God when you are serving.

A woman came to see her pastor one day. She was despondent. She was quite wealthy, but her money has not brought her happiness. She had found no meaning or purpose in life. She felt empty inside. She had come to the church now, seeking help.

Her pastor asked her, “Will you do whatever I ask you?” “Yes,” she answered. The pastor said, “You are not going to want to do this, but if you will do it, it will change your life. Go and buy some flowers tomorrow morning. Then go down to the hospital for the poor. Go onto one of the wards and give the flowers to the patients there.”

The woman didn’t want to do that. She had never even been inside that hospital; it seemed beneath her. But because she had promised the pastor, she went. She bought the flowers, went down to the hospital, climbed the stairs to the second ward, and began to hand out the flowers to those in the midst of pain and suffering and loneliness. It was embarrassing at first, but she found herself amazed at the way the patients’ faces lit up as she handed them the flowers. She was touched by the gratitude that showed in their eyes and the willingness of many to talk to her because she was willing to listen.

The next week she went back again, and again the week after that. Soon she began going twice a week, and on and on it went for several years. She became known as “the flower lady” at that particular hospital, and she was able to bring into the lives of many people a little bit of joy and love. But at the same time, **she** got well! She discovered for herself a new meaning, purpose, and joy in life. Her pastor had been right. As she reached out to others with love, her disillusionment faded, and it was replaced by happiness and fulfillment.

That’s the way it is. Remember how Jesus put it: “When we lose ourselves for others, we find ourselves!” If we feel we have lost God, the way to find him again is to discover him by loving his children. So when we feel downcast, or if we feel our faith is slipping, the thing to do is to “keep on keeping on.” The thing to do is to keep on loving others.

SECOND, WHEN YOU FEEL DISILLUSIONED, DISAPPOINTED, AND DOWNHEARTED, REMEMBER TO KEEP ON ENCOURAGING OTHERS. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that we are a family, a community of faith sharing the joys and sorrows of life together. “Encourage one another” he says to us. We were never meant to bear our burdens by ourselves. We all need a support community – a support system to affirm us, to uphold us, to encourage us – and that is a significant part of the task of the church.

The Scriptures put it like this: “Carry each other’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2). Tragically, many people make a bad mistake at this point. They stay away from church. But, that’s a mistake. For the church should be a part of the healing process. It’s our support system, and when heartache comes, we need to get back to the church as quickly as we can.

Let me illustrate this personally. On May 8, 1978 my mother died following a two year battle with ovarian cancer. Two months later I led a one week senior high youth mission trip to North Carolina. One evening during that week I had a rough moment in which I realized that I no longer had a mom to talk with and share my hopes, dreams, and hurts. The impact of this moment overwhelmed me and I openly wept in the presence of the youth and adults sponsors. Several minutes later, one of the adults came up to me and asked me to join him for a walk. That walk was just what I needed at the moment. He gave the gentle touch of a hug and words of encouragement. I felt his love and care.

Now, that is what the church is all about. Whatever happens, we must keep on loving and keep on encouraging.

THIRD, WHEN YOU FEEL DISILLUSIONED, DISAPPOINTED, AND DOWNHEARTED, REMEMBER, WE MUST KEEP ON WORSHIPING WITH OTHERS. Remember the writer of Hebrews said not to neglect meeting together. Worship was what he was talking about, and he was right. When we get discouraged or feel defeated we need to get into the presence of God. Worship is our great reminder that God is with us, and nothing, not even death, can separate us from the Lord.

One day Isaiah went to the Temple downhearted. King Uzziah had died, and the people didn’t know what would become of their nation. It was in danger of falling. There were all kinds of problems, and Isaiah was confused and scared and discouraged. So he went to the Temple and worshiped, and there he saw, in the words of Scripture, the Lord “high and lifted up” (Isaiah 6:1). He needed that. It

reminded Isaiah that King Uzziah had died but that God had not. God was very much alive, God was still in control of things, and he could be trusted. That's what worship does for us.

A chaplain in World War II told of a Sunday morning on one of the islands south of Japan. It was time for worship and it was raining badly, so hard that one could hardly see through it. Despite the rain, about one hundred men gathered in the mud. The chaplain shouted over the noise of the rain and wind, "Do you want to have a worship service today?" To the man, they all said yes. So they hummed some familiar hymns because they didn't have hymnbooks. They recited the familiar words of the twenty-third Psalm because they had no Bible. The chaplain said, "Do you want me to preach?" Standing in the rain, ankle-deep in mud, the men answered, "Yes, preach." So for twenty minutes, the chaplain preached to those men and they listened intently.

The chaplain later said that he came back to the civilian pulpit where people sit in cushioned pews and air-conditioned comfort, where there are those who feel that to come two blocks to church is a very painful thing to do. Why is it that a worship service over there in the rain and mud means more than worship in a beautiful church sanctuary sometimes? The answer is simple: those men on that rain-soaked island knew that they were facing the possibility of death at any moment, and they needed to be reminded that the God they put their faith in and trusted their lives with was bigger than the world, bigger than the war, bigger even than death, and as long they put their trust in God, all was well. Friends, we need to remember that week by week.

So, when times are hard, keep on loving others, keep on encouraging others, and keep on worshiping with others. Keep on keeping on!

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