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### Speaking Hope

There was a time in my teenage years when I simply couldn't get enough of 'telling people about Jesus.' Everywhere I went, everyone I encountered...somehow, someway, the conversation turned back to Jesus. And while I can't remember every conversation I've had about Jesus, there is one conversation that forever haunts me. School had just let out, and after heading home, my friend and I were walking around the golf course that backed up to my parent's house. It was near the green of *hole number 4* where I saw two teenagers, just a bit older than me, working in their back yard. For whatever reason, perhaps on account of my teenage zeal, I approached them and, shouting across a drainage ditch, asked, "Hey, do you guys know Jesus Christ as your Savior?" They stopped working, looked at each other quizzically, and one responded with some frustration, "No, I'm a Buddhist." Picking up his frustrated tone, I answered back, "Well then, you're going straight to hell." Understandably, he didn't like my answer very much, and a verbal shouting match ensued, which appeared as if it was going to turn physical. My friend pulled me away, got me calmed down, and we walked home without mentioning what was perhaps the strangest and most awkward attempt at evangelizing in my life.

There is certainly some humor in that story, thinking about how I almost got into a fist fight as a result of trying to share the gospel of the Prince of Peace. But that same bit of humor, that same incident, illustrates for me a truth that isn't humorous, but rather a bit depressing: the exhilarating, transformational, and unfathomable love of God is, sadly, often overshadowed by our own human failure. That story comes from a time in my life when my theology wasn't nearly as nuanced as it is now, a time in my life when I saw evangelism in a different way. In no way would I suggest going about evangelism the way I did as a teenager. But still, I find myself

thinking about that encounter as a way to reflect on just how well or how poorly I am reflecting the faith, hope, and love of Jesus Christ in my own life today.

In the reading from 1 Thessalonians, Paul, in his own way and in response to a different context, was attempting to reflect that same faith, hope, and love of Jesus Christ. The church in Thessalonica, like all of the infant churches, was a fragile community. In some ways, their lives were turned upside down by their hearing of the Gospel and their receiving it into their midst. Lives were reoriented, changed, transformed. But like any major life transition, there was a sense of chaos, a sense of the uncontrollable, a sense of instability. And like so many of the early Christians, they believed that the Lord Jesus Christ would return from the sky to take the faithful home in their own generation, before any of them grew old, before any had a chance to die.

But, we know from Paul's words this morning that death did come to that community. Death, like a thief, crept in and took to the grave some of the faithful, some of those baptized resting in the promises of Jesus. And so, like many of us today when facing the death of someone we loved, or facing even the pain and chaos of the world, the church fell into despair, fell into a fear-induced hopelessness. But ever-the-pastor, St. Paul came alongside that hurting community with words of hope rooted in the resurrection of Jesus: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died." Rooted in the life-changing and death-destroying resurrection of Jesus, Paul offers to a hurting community words of hope, of stability, of promise. He ends his message of consolation and hope with this charge: "Therefore encourage one another with these words."

Paul was able to take such simple things as words and weave them into a tapestry of encouragement, steadfastness, and hope. He wrote with the conviction of one who had tasted

and seen of the goodness of the Risen Christ, and his words bubbled over with that goodness. In contrast with St. Paul, my pathetic attempt at evangelism from the past seems positively un-Christian. And though it was the zeal of a misguided new Christian, most of us can point to the ways in which the exhilarating, transformational, and unfathomable love of God is overshadowed by our own human failure or the failures of others. Ultimately, however, we can't control what has been said by others, and we can't take back what we have said in the past. We can only control what we say now and going forward. And so, the question for us is "How well are my words and actions reflecting the hopefulness of Jesus Christ?"

Sometimes, it's easy for preachers to stand in an elevated pulpit, lifted up from the peoples' midst, and to entertain notions of moral superiority and spiritual maturity. I've heard sermons where the preacher blanketed the congregation with guilt-inducing words of judgment and critique. But in the spirit of St. Paul, I'd rather say this: You are all beloved children of God, beautiful to behold. Your feet take you into places of need that I can never go. Your hands bear the gentleness and grace of Jesus to people I will never meet. Your eyes give you a perspective I'll never have, and your mouth can speak words of hope God has given only to you. You, who live most of your lives outside of these walls...you have the potential to spread seeds of hope and love in ways that I, as one who is anchored to this church every day, cannot.

Our Prayer Book speaks of the people in the pews in this way: "The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church." Truly, the Gospel can only go so far without you...you, who all together make up St. Andrew's On-the-Sound. This church is somehow lessened without each and every one of you. Together, we can make this church to be a shining beacon of hope in a wounded, beaten down world. So, live out your calling to transform the world with your actions and words of hope and encouragement. The world needs you.