



Character Requires Hope

TEXT
Luke 3:1-14

April 7, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Life is messy sometimes. We all know that. When life gets complicated, we need character, some spiritual maturity.

That's one way to think about the trajectory of this sermon series. In a world so often captured by suspicion, when values of honesty or humility are eschewed, and practices of loving the neighbor and welcoming the stranger are ignored, we need some character, some grown-ups.

And it takes courage. I can only imagine the courage required for Jesus himself as he neared Jerusalem, knowing that his lonely death awaited him. It takes courage to be a person of character in this world.

But courage can't survive without hope. I don't think courage is sustainable unless we have hope.

Of course, hope itself is not the easiest thing to maintain. The harsh march of life can erode hope.

Angie Thomas' novel *The Hate U Give* revolves around 17-year-old Starr Carter, a girl from an impoverished black neighborhood. She is in a car, stopped by the police, and she sees her friend Khalil shot and killed. In her grief and rage, she says, "I've seen it happen over and over again: a black person

gets killed just for being black, and [everything erupts]. I've tweeted RIP hashtags, reblogged pictures on Tumblr, and signed every petition out there. I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down. Now I am that person, and I'm too afraid to speak."¹

By her telling, she makes it sound like she has lost her courage, but I imagine it's deeper than that. I think her hope is eroded.

Hope is hard to maintain because the world is a mess. Live long enough, and the world will disappoint you and call into question the basis for hope. But the harder truth is, it's not just the world out there: We are all a bit of a mess as well. Any degree of self-awareness, and we know this is true.

One of the theological teachings of the faith is that we are sinful. Last fall I reminded you that there are some voices in the tradition that describe the condition of sin as "total depravity." Ouch! That sounds pretty bad. I mean, it's hard not to argue that human beings have serious problems, but totally depraved?

So, what does that mean? Total depravity does not mean

that there is no good in us; no, not at all. We know from our own experience that there is real and genuine goodness in people. We see it all the time. But we also know that no one is good all the time. "Total depravity" means that we aren't pure. It's not that we can't be good; it's that even when we are, we don't escape a hint of selfishness. We fall short.

Francis Spufford says it this way: "Wherever the line is drawn between good and evil ... we're always ... [walking] on both sides of [that line.]"² And not just by accident. Spufford says, "It's our active inclination to break stuff, including moods, promises, relationships we care about and our own well-being."³

We have a consistent inclination to mess things up — even things we care about.

So, even when we are trying to do good, there are unintended consequences, complications. It's not that there is no good; it's that we are never completely good. Nothing escapes the power of sin.

If you have ever done a home repair project, you know about total depravity. It never goes the way it is supposed to.

There was an octagonal window in our bathroom, and the wood trim outside had rotted.

I got my tool belt and assured Carol I could repair this in a jiffy. I would just remove the rotted wood, mill another piece to match, pop it in, add a little paint and caulk, and *presto* — good as new. I did just that: removed the bad, replaced it with a new beautiful piece of trim, popped it in, and would have been finished — had not with the last little tap of the hammer — securing the new trim in place — the window cracked. It remained cracked for several years. So last week, we got new glass, and as I was replacing the new glass, some of the old trim broke. Now I had to replace that. But now, after five years and multiple trips to Home Depot, I have finished this simple project.

Even when I am trying to do a good thing, there are often complications, unintended consequences. Nothing completely escapes the power of sin, and our stumbling along can erode our hope.

But oddly, John the Baptist can help. If I understand the text, John's whole life was shaped by hope. He could taste it. It was in every word he preached, in every action, in every relationship. He died for hope.

Luke says, he preached in the wilderness. You have learned from me that wilderness is not a statement of geography but of life. The wilderness is where life is complicated and messy. The wilderness is where the way forward is not always clear, and so much of life is beyond our control. The wilderness is where many around us, particularly those in power, are selfish. The wilderness is where it's not obvi-

ous that the word of God stands forever, but rather it is a word that competes with other words.

It is there, in the midst of life's complications, that John preaches, and he says, "Repent." Repent literally means to turn around — to go in a new direction. Repentance is important because, as we have said before, we are sinful folks. We mess things up, even things we care about.

I remember years ago, Carol looked at me and said, "Tom Are, there are some wonderful things about you."

"Why, thank you, Sweetheart!"

She said, "I am working very hard to pay attention to those good things because if I don't, the other things about you may overwhelm me." Oh, total depravity!

We all have those aspects of our lives that need redemption. We all have hurts that need healing. We all have burdens we can't let go. To that circumstance, "repent" is actually good news.

"Repent" may be the most hopeful word in scripture. John, and then Jesus after him, both preached *repent* because they trusted we can do better. Tomorrow can be a new day — not just yesterday lived all over again.

When John proclaimed this good news, everyone responded with the same question: What shall we do?

He told them, "If you have two coats, share."

Tax collectors asked. He said, "Don't cheat anyone."

Soldiers asked him. He said, "Don't abuse your power."

Now look, this is not complicated stuff. *Share; don't cheat;*

don't abuse power. John the Baptist sounds a lot like a kindergarten teacher here: Share; play fair; don't hit people; be kind.

That's the amazing thing: When our hope shapes our choices, even simple choices, the love of God shows up in us in power.

Now lest I confuse you, John is no graduation speaker who promises us that the world is our oyster, and if we just believe, we can fly; that there is no obstacle we can't overcome. John is no Pollyanna preacher. John knows sin is real. But John also knows the love of God is powerful. Hope calls us to do the good, as imperfect as it may be — to do the good that is ours to do.

John knows there is so much in our lives that is beyond our control. There is so much we can't change in this world. Like yesterday, tomorrow will bring its share of heartbreak and disappointment. Our repentance is not tied to our success. Repentance is about our character. It's about who we are. Character is what you choose when you aren't in control; it's about who you are when you don't know how things will work out. Character is the expression of hope, of the good, even when we know we are not pure.

Tom Charles is an elder in the Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, and participates in their refugee resettlement ministry. He has coordinated the resettlement of six refugee families, the last of which are Sunni Muslims from Syria. I heard him speak at NEXT a few years ago.

Tom is a soft spoken, retired banker who holds an MBA from

the University of Delaware. He said the most faithful thing he has ever done as a Christian is offer welcome to the stranger.

The refugees he knows have come from dangerous places. They have spent years in refugee camps and have gone through several years of vetting. They come with nothing but a few clothes and a lot of bad memories.

He is a man of character and hope. Tom is working toward a day, he told us, when this ministry is an antidote to the fear we have of the stranger. Relationship is the antidote to exclusion. He choked up when he told us both the most faithful thing, and the most patriotic thing he has ever done is welcome the refugee.⁴

There is so much beyond our control, but hope calls us to do the good, as imperfect as it may be, that is ours to do. For the power of God's love shows up there.

Mattie Rigsby is a grandmother in Clyde Edgerton's novel *Walking Across Egypt*. She read the parable of the sheep and goats about the "least of these," and she decided that she didn't know any people Jesus would have been friends with. So, she befriends Wesley. He's a teenager with a record. She meets him at "Juvie," which she calls the RC, rehabilitation center, and they begin a rather unusual friendship.

One Sunday at lunch, Mattie's adult son Robert said, "Mother, I need to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"Have you been feeling all right?"

"Fine, why? I just feel bad about that boy having to go back to the RC and all. I feel sorry for him."

"Well, that boy don't feel sorry for you."

"How do you know?"

"Well, he ... he ... he's a thief, criminal, juvenile delinquent. That's the best place for him."

"He's never had a chance to hear the Gospel."

"He's got as good a chance as anybody else to get the Gospel. They probably got Gideon Bibles all over the RC."

"Nobody ever loved him."

"If they did, he probably stole their car."

"Robert, the gospel of Matthew says ..."

"Mother, I know what Matthew says."

"No, you don't. Not in a long time."

"Yes, I do. I listened to what Matthew said for 23 years."

"Well, you don't know what I'm fixing to say. ... *Whatever ye do unto one of the least of these my brethren, you do also to me.* Wesley is certainly one of the least of these my brethren."

"Mama, you've already done for him. You already done I don't know what. Doesn't the Bible say when to stop?"

"No, not that I know of."⁵

You know, for 70 years here at Mission, and for almost two years now at Antioch, we have been showing up here to encourage us to try to do the good that is ours to do.

Not because we are perfect ... no, far from that. But because we are called and because the world is in great need.

People are afraid, and they need to know they are loved. People are poor, and they need to know justice is coming. People are ashamed, and they need to be told they are not defined by the worst in them. People are losing hope, and they need to witness people of character.

So, keep on doing what you do. Stand tall. Hold on to simple values you have known since you were a kid: value honesty and humility. Practice the most basic rules of faith. Love your neighbor, and welcome the stranger. Keep on showing up and trying to do the good that is yours to do. And don't lose hope — because the Bible doesn't tell us to stop. And when hope shapes your choices, the love of God shows up in power.

¹Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (2017), pp. 34–35

²Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic* (2012), p. 33

³*Ibid.*, p. 27

⁴Tom Charles' presentation can be heard at <http://nextchurch.net/2017-national-gathering-testimony-tom-charles/>

⁵Clyde Edgerton, *Walking Across Egypt* (1987), pp. 175–177

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.