

1 We've been asking ourselves questions over the last couple of months in worship, and today we're continuing to ask the question, "How can I live to give?" As we do that, I hope you'll focus your prayers and attention during the week on each week's challenge as well as the invitation for you to respond on your Live to Give Promise Cards. God's very nature is one of self-giving for the sake of others, and as God's children, we're called to follow God's example of giving.

Most of us hear "Live to Give" and immediately jump to the word "give." But right giving starts with right living, cultivating an attitude of the heart that expresses itself as disciplined and joyful giving. It's living with an understanding and belief that the sum total of who we are and what we have is a gift from God, gifts that we hold loosely as God's stewards, sharing those gifts wisely in ways that are consistent with God's heart. God uses the outward behavior- our giving- to provide for God's Kingdom, but God's Kingdom is built with transformed hearts, hearts that are increasingly being shaped into the image of the heart of our loving God.

2 Today we're asking how we can grow in living to give hope. We use the word "hope" rather loosely, don't we? I hope it doesn't snow. I hope the battery on my phone doesn't die. I hope the Vikings, or the Packers, or even the Broncos will have a winning season? That's not the kind of hope I'm talking about. I'm talking about something deeper, something spiritual, something so deep within your heart and mind that you might even have some difficulty expressing it in words. I like the way Emily Dickinson said it in her poem:

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -¹*

Can you relate to that? Have you ever had something perching in your soul that serenades you with a song so beautiful that you feel it from head to toe? All of us have times of discouragement when we can't hear the hopeful song, but have you at least heard it? Have

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42889/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers-314>

you felt it? Do you want it? And what are you willing to give to have it?

3 The Apostle Paul had a great deal to say about hope as well as where that hope comes from. I'm reading from 2Corinthians, Chapter 5, verses 13-15 and 19-20 in The Message. **{Read passage}**

“Become friends with God; God’s already a friend with you.” Do you believe it? Have you received it? Maybe you’re thinking that you’re not worthy of being God’s friend. And you’d be right! On your own, you’re not worthy. The Good News is that you don’t have to do it alone. Christ died so that included in his death, we might be included in his resurrection life, not only for the future, but even on this day, at this hour, and in this place. That’s the message of hope that we’ve been entrusted with. Do you believe it? Have you received it?

If not, have you asked God for that kind of hope? Have you prayed for an assurance that God’s saving grace is wrapped around you like an electric blanket on a cold winter’s day? John Wesley was convinced that you can have a hopeful assurance of your salvation, because he had it. He didn’t always enjoy that though, and for a long while he was simply preaching faith until he had it. But he did receive it, he did her that “tune without words” in his heart. I’m also convinced of that hope. How about you?

If you can’t hear or feel that hope anymore, or maybe you’ve never really had it, may I suggest one helpful refuge is to pray through some of the great encouraging scriptures, like Isaiah 40:31- “[T]hose who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”² Try reading familiar passages in new translations. I love this one from the Message version of Colossians 1:27: “Christ is in you, therefore you can look forward to sharing in God’s glory. It’s that simple.” Or how about Romans 5:5: “[H]ope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”³ If you need some help finding some hopeful scriptures, I’m here to help. And so is Google, Alexa, and Siri!

4 If we have the hope that comes from knowing and serving the Living Christ, then how will we give that hope to others? How can a church full of Minnesotans ever hope to

² Isaiah 40:31, NIV (2011)

³ Romans 5:5, NIV (2011)

witness to their faith? Usually it happens one person at a time, over a long period of time. Remember Nate from the video we watched earlier? Kim gave the gift of hope to Lisa, who gave the gift of hope to Thomas, who gave the gift of hope to James, who gave the gift of hope to Nate. That didn't all happen in a day. It took years of working together or learning together or even living together. There's a good chance Nate and Kim will never meet on this side of eternity, and it's pretty likely that neither Nate nor Kim would ever imagine the tangled web of years and relationships that connected them to each other. None of the people who shared their hope did it by standing along the freeway with a sandwich board sign, or even by knocking on doors with leaflets. They did it by paying attention to what God was doing, and sharing the authentic hope they had with others, in listening, in actions and in words.

5 I have a friend in the Minnesota Annual Conference who I greatly admire. You might have met him, Fred Vanderwerf. He looks just like an ordinary guy, right? Fred is currently serving as the District Superintendent of the Southern Prairie District, but that's not what I find so admirable about Fred. Fred loves to share Jesus with people. In Fred's own words, "No matter what I do, I cannot not tell people about Jesus." Friends, Fred is an evangelist with a capital E. He truly is uniquely gifted and called in ways that most of us may never experience. But I want to share two things about Fred that we can emulate in our own unique ways to help us grow in the ways we live to give hope.

The first thing: Fred understands that the way he lives either reinforces or takes away from any words he has to say. Fred lives to give: service, sacrifices, hope, worship, and grace, and because he does, the witness he has to share about the powerful love of Jesus is that much easier to receive and believe. When we live to give, it's a package deal, not an ala carte menu. Followers of Jesus are learning to live to give in all these ways, because they all spring from a heart that is singing with the hope of Jesus.

The second thing: Fred practices what he describes as "listening evangelism." Instead of seeing people as objects to be spoken to or converted, Fred strikes up conversations and listens. He asks questions, he listens intently to their stories, and he listens for ways that God has already been working in a person's life. Gone are the days when even a pastor can expect the right to speak and be heard. Fred earns the right to speak by authentically and

carefully listening first, both to those he's with and to the Holy Spirit. Why not give it a try? The next time you're having a conversation with someone, set aside your need to speak and focus on listening, hearing deeply what's being said instead of thinking about how you're going to reply. Listen for what God might be doing in their life, and what God might be saying to you. Be fully present to the other and to God. You might be surprised to find yourself in a spiritual conversation- not because you planned it, but because God led you there.

6 Robert Frost once said, "Hope is not found in a way out but a way through."⁴ There's wisdom in that saying. Jesus found his hope not by getting out of Calvary, but by going through it, in obedience to his Father. Because Jesus found hope, we can find hope, even if it means at times we have to walk a difficult road in this life. There are so many ways we can be discouraged in this world. If that's you today, I have one more hopeful poem to share with you, this one from Sri Chinmoy:

*Hope abides; therefore I abide.
Countless frustrations have not cowed me.
I am still alive, vibrant with life.
The black cloud will disappear,
The morning sun will appear once again
In all its supernal glory.⁵*

Don't let life's frustrations cow you. As long as you have the strength to draw breath, you are alive in Christ and a bearer of the Good News of Jesus. The morning sun will appear once again, no matter how dark the night.

Your challenge this week, once you've reclaimed your own hope, is to find a way to offer hope to someone else- not through random acts of kindness, but through intentional acts of hope. Find a way to give the hope of Jesus to someone else by being fully present to them. Observe, ask questions, listen, and watch for the hand of God. I believe that when we intentionally lean into our desire to live to give hope, God honors that desire with a fresh

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/450837-hope-is-not-found-in-a-way-out-but-a>

⁵ <http://www.poetseers.org/themes/poems-hope/index.html>

pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Let's try it this week and see what happens! Who knows, in giving it away, you might even find the hope you're looking for.



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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