

A Rose in the Wintertime
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
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UUMSB

Song:

#346 Come, Sing a Song with Me Words by Carolyn McDade

1. Come, sing a song with me,
come, sing a song with me,
come, sing a song with me,
that I might know your mind.

Chorus:

And I'll bring you hope
when hope is hard to find,
and I'll bring a song of love
and a rose in the wintertime.

2. Come, dream a dream with me,
3. Come, walk in rain with me,
4. Come, share a rose with me,

Sermon:

A New Year's tradition is of course making resolutions. Many people make promises to themselves about behaviors they would like to let go of or take up each year. Sometimes resolutions are spiritually meaningful, as in our ceremony with the burning bowl from a couple weeks ago, and sometimes they are more concrete. Part of our work as a community of faith is to help each other grow and change, and so each week we gather in worship to share in strength, to talk about things that are important to us, and have the opportunity for reflection and spiritual filling up. Sometimes when I am feeling down, or stuck, what I need is an infusion of hope. I get that in our time together, in seeing the goodness in each of you.

Hope is one of those words we can use casually. I hope it is sunny tomorrow, I hope that I win the lottery, I hope for good health. When we talk about hope in that way, it is really about wish fulfillment. Hope can be bigger than this. We have limited control. We do what we can, we control what we can, we try and persuade others, and the rest, that is in the hands of everyone else and their choices, not to mention chance. Hope is the spark that pushes us toward connection with others, when we may be feeling *hopeless*. It's a spark that warms up our heart, and helps us pay attention to what possibilities are in front of us. It is a rose in the wintertime, a connection with the friend who brought it.

How many of you have heard 1 Corinthians 13 read at a wedding? What do you know about Paul's letters in the Bible? [conversation] I don't often preach from Paul because of the behavior codes in his work. Some of them are all about telling folks what they can and can't do

and a lot of that is really icky¹, but it is icky for an interesting reason. When Jesus was first preaching his message, he was preaching to other Jews, *and* outsiders, but largely he was focused on addressing Jewish law and custom. Paul heard from God soon after Jesus' death and was converted, and he made it his mission to open the message up to everyone, especially the pagans. As you can imagine, that led to some culture conflicts. The pagans around that area were still participating in temple prostitution, and animal sacrifice (hence all the conversation about Jesus being the last sacrifice), and so on, so Paul and the people who wrote letters as Paul – because that was also a thing at the time—had lots of rules. The actual Pauline letters are some of the oldest writing in the New Testament. Paul felt called to shape the Christian message to speak to different communities and to talk about a radical welcome to the faith. One of the letters that scholars agree was written by the actual Paul is 1 Corinthians. So with that wordy context, in case it has been a while, here is the end of chapter 13:

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end...For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.²

The love that Paul is talking about is not romantic love, but in ancient Greek, *agape* love, the love that Gandhi and Dr. King translated into their work for justice. King defined *agape* as “purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is the love of God operating in the human heart” (Papers 6:325).³ The East Point Peace Academy defines *agape* as “a “disinterested” love, meaning that a person who has Agape is not interested in whether the other person loves them back. They simply love because they are, because they acknowledge the humanity in the other.”⁴ Paul is talking about the unknowable and what happens when people are together in *agape*, in unearned and boundless love: “Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

In order to know people, in order to love people, in order to work for others in the world, we need to move, and we need hope. Love may move mountains and inspire us to great works. It may be the hardest thing we ever do to hold those who we struggle to like or even tolerate with love in our hearts, *and* we need hope to push us to try. Love without hope, isn't going to happen. In *Hope Dies Last* Studs Terkel wrote:

Activists have always battled the odds. But it's not a matter of Sisyphus rolling that stone up the hill. ... It's more like a legion of Davids, with all sorts of slingshots. It's not one slingshot that will do it. Nor will it happen at once. It's a long haul. It's step by step. As Mahalia Jackson sang out, “We're on our way”—not to Cannon Land (*sic.*), perhaps, but to the world as a better place than it has been before.⁵

¹ This is a technical term ;-)

² 1Corinthians13:8-13 NRSV

³ http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_agape/

⁴ <http://eastpointpeace.org/resources/glossary/>

⁵ Terkel, Studs (2004-11-01). *Hope Dies Last: Keeping The Faith In Troubled Times* (p. 12). New Press, The.

There is no promised land where people will always think of others before themselves, where we have perfect compassion, *agape* love, are always adaptable, and comfortable with conflict and disagreement. We are human, messy, sometimes stuck people, who can do terrible things to one another and our planet. So how do we love each other? Where is our hope?

Mark Erelli has a song also called, "Hope Dies Last." This is one of my favorites of his. In it he goes through a litany of things that are troubling in the world and how they haven't changed, but in the end he flips the language to share how his love for his family is also unchanging. That is his spark of hope. Here are a couple of the lines:

Sometimes it's all that you can do to avert your eyes
If you let too much in it will leave you paralyzed
In a world where all you love could disappear
Nothing much has changed here

And there's a storm coming on fast
Better lash yourself to the mast
But of all that comes to pass
Hope dies last

In our hardest, darkest corners, hope is the spark that can push us to put our first toe forward. In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, hope leads to the first step.

I visited with my cousin on Friday who is in need of a liver transplant, and found out that she is going to be having a live transplant, which means that someone who doesn't know her, is going to donate a part of their liver to her, and it will regenerate for both of them. That was a spark. The other day I got a phone call out of the blue that was supportive and kind from a complete stranger. What are some moments of hope you have encountered lately?
[conversation]

We are not alone in our struggles to understand our world. We are connected to everything and no one person can do it alone. When we are in relationship with others and with creation, hope can spark all over the place. We have little control, some might argue we have none, but we do make choices and our choices are shaped by our faith, our history, our stories, and our relationships. Choices make change. If change is a true constant in our world, then there is hope that injustice, oppression and apathy can be transformed. I have hope and I am ready to love.

As I was thinking about this sermon this morning, with all this talk of feet and movement, there was a song running through my head. Would you sing with me?

Guide my feet while I run this race.
Guide my feet while I run this race.
Guide my feet while I run this race,
for I don't want to run this race in vain!

Stand by me while I run this race.
So may it be. Amen.

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