

Homily – Hope for the Future

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It is not easy getting a first job on a new career path, and I found this to be true as I started a second career as a priest. As I went through the interview and search process with parishes, I seemed to be at a disadvantage since I had little to no paid church experience. I had twenty years of experience in corporate finance, and ten years of volunteer work at various churches, but every church wanted to call a priest with paid parish experience. For me, there was a sense of hopelessness about my search for a call. Some of you may have also experienced a sense of hopelessness about a job search or some other part of life.

Now a person who feels hopeless and continues to do the same thing is going to continue to feel hopeless. As Albert Einstein once said, "We can't solve problems by using the same thinking we used when we created them." So to manage or diminish my sense of hopelessness I needed to find some new things or ways of thinking to overcome my lack of paid church experience, and I turned to some mentors and coaches for advice.

One person I turned to was Rob Voyle. Other-Rob is an Episcopal priest, psychologist and trainer who has done some coaching here in the diocese during our last bishop search process.

Rob's piece of advice to me was to make sure that I asked a very specific question of the parish search committee and then vestry. Rob said that when candidates ask this question then they are called to a parish. He said the only circumstance in which this question had failed to result in a call was when he had coached two candidates who both asked this same question of the search committee. In that situation, the question was successful for one candidate but by default not for the other.

So with this question, I had a renewed sense of hope, and I tried asking this question with two parishes. At the first parish I ended up pulling out of the call process at the end because it did not feel like a good fit for me. So in this instance we don't know if the question was successful or not. And then I used the question with a second parish, here at St. Barnabas.

Here is the question...

Imagine I have come as your priest and together we have been incredibly successful. And it is now ten years down the road, what would we have accomplished and what would we have done?

Now, before I do a deeper dive into this question that helped to shape my future, let me bring in today's scripture readings.

Our Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah, is a message of hope for those that have been feeling hopeless. Prophets seem to alternate between using vividly violent language to shake people out of their comfort zone and using beautiful comfort language to give people hope. *"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him.... On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."*

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the prophet is telling those who have been experiencing the hardship of exile that they will come back together again and their ancestors will be great once again. Isaiah was sharing hope.

In our Gospel reading, John the Baptist is also playing the role of a prophet. However, John is using vividly violent language to confront the comfortable. He tells the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism that they need to repent. They need to recognize, regret and reorient. These are the three "R's" of repentance.

They need to "Recognize" that they have done wrong or are heading in the wrong direction.

Then, they need to "Regret" that they have done wrong. This is counting the cost of what they have done. Many people know they are doing something wrong but don't regret it, especially when the cost of the actions is not immediate. This is why the prophets jump up and down shouting about the bad consequences of turning away from God and God's ways.

Finally, they need to "Reorient" from what they have been doing and turn to God and the good that is of God. Here is where there needs to be a reorienting from hate to curiosity and compassion so that they can discover the deeper values, values that are not of the human ego, but values that are of God.

Recognize, regret and reorient.

So, in our Old Testament reading the prophet, Isaiah, is re-orienting the people towards a bright future. He is giving them a genuine hope in the present so that they can begin living into a happy future.

And in our Gospel reading, John is helping the religious elites recognize that they are getting it wrong. He shares a future that is dim. He tries to take away a false hope so that the pain will be great enough to lead into regret and reorientation. John bursts the bubble of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

For you see, “genuine hope is not based on a fantasy of how you would like the future to be. It is based on both an image of a preferred future and a reality-based awareness that we have the resources to achieve that future. Passively ‘hoping’ the future will be better is unhelpful. Imagine someone living in an abusive relationship, hoping that their abuser will change. That kind of hope is very unhelpful and even dangerous. Giving up hope that the abuser will change is a helpful first step in the person taking charge of and responsibility for their own life. Finding the resources to move out of the relationship and growing out of their victim consciousness is essential to establishing a sense of personal assurance and a realistic hope.”

Now, “when people say that they gave up hope and things got better, they are really saying that they gave up avoidance, denial, and fantasy. They may really be saying: ‘When I saw how bad things really were I knew I had to make changes rather than just hoping that things would change.’ Rather than living in a fantasy of the day when all the problems are gone, they began to take steps in the present to create the life they wanted.” Though it seems counter-intuitive real hope is built on recognition, regret, and reorientation.

And here is something that supports this idea of genuine hope but it will be of surprise to many of you. Research indicates that cancer patient who pressure themselves to stay optimistic and refuse to look at the possibility that they may die actually have poorer survival rates than those who have a more realistic appraisal of their circumstances. Being authentic by being miserable when we are miserable, and at the same time continuing to engage in those things that are meaningful, is more helpful than a pressured optimism built on denial.”

Now, in each of these circumstances that I have shared, recognition or mindfulness is the first step toward growing into a realistic future. “When we change the way we look at things, then the things we look at change.”

Or put another way, “one the greatest discoveries of our generation is that people can alter their lives by altering their states of mind.”

Or the corollary is captured in this Chinese proverb. “If we don’t change our direction, we will likely end up where we are headed.”

We often live into the futures that we imagine and in today's readings Isaiah and John help their contemporaries, and by extension us, reorient our thinking about the future by shifting our hope in the present.

Now let me get back to that all important question that ensures a Rector call is made by a search committee and vestry. Here is the question again along with its very specific preface.

"Image I have come as your priest and together we have been incredibly successful. And it is now ten years down the road, what would we have accomplished and what would we have done?"

I think this question along with its preface plays into the same human dynamic that the prophets were using to help reorient and then envision hope.

The preface to this question is a subtle but powerful way to allow and enable the search committee to imagine a specific future that has two components.

First, I have come as your priest, and second together we have been incredibly successful. I think the "together" part of this is important in fueling the imagination. And, the success has not been modest. It has been incredible. Imagining an incredible future is fun for a search committee, but it might not be realistic.

So, the actual question is very practical. Imagine ten years into the future, and what would we have accomplished and what would we have done. These are very practical things to help the imagined future be one that is realistic rather than a fantasy.

Now I wonder if this type of guided imagination of the prophets has other applications. Might guided-imagination be useful in healing our country? Might it be a way to bring reconciliation to families that have seen painful divisions? And might we always remember that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus have healed our relationship with God. No matter what we do in this life, God will always love us and will always be present with us. What type of beautiful future can we each live into when we remember these truths about our living and loving God? God loves you, so what are you going to do about it?