

Hope to the City

What does it mean to bring hope to the city?

Recently I sat among a group of pastors who were involved, in varying degrees, in inner city ministry. “This kid came to our program and gave her life to Christ,” one shared. “For a while we saw significant change. But then something happened, something went wrong. Somehow she got pulled back into her old lifestyle. Today she is no longer with us; she’s back on the streets.” Then, despairingly, he asked, “Are we really making a difference? Is there any hope?”

The people and circumstances are often different, but not the story. I have seen it in other youth workers and experienced it for myself: the anguish and sense of failure over a promising life gone bad. When it happens it begs the question: “Are we making a difference? Is there any hope?”

I found myself cringing the other day as a pastor’s wife referred to one of their youth as the “top, key young person” of their ministry. It is amazing how we sometimes allow the credibility of an entire ministry to rest on the success of one person. “Your ministry is credible,” friends may say, “because you have _____.” Don’t misunderstand. Changed lives are important! But to place a baby Christian’s life on display, and then hinge our hopes on that person never stumbling, is dangerous. Trophies are nice, but they can break.

What is hope? The secular definitions of “wishful thinking” and “unfounded optimism” have no place in Christian thought, for biblical hope means a certainty of future events. The apostle Paul put it this way: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1-2) The action word is rejoice. When genuine hope is present, people will rejoice.

Perhaps an illustration might help. Michael Jordan. The NBA Finals. Last game, final seconds. Paxton makes the winning shot. The people cheer! Where’s instant replay? Lets see that winning shot again! Wait a minute. In slow motion, as the ball heads toward Paxton’s waiting hands, we see something else in the distance, in the corner of the screen. It’s Michael Jordan. He’s falling to the ground! As Paxton releases the ball, Jordan’s on the floor, his hands and legs flailing wildly. He’s rejoicing! He’s crazy with joy! We glance back. The ball is still in the air, heading toward the net.

Michael knew. So can we, and so can the people we serve. “And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.” What does it mean to bring hope to the city? What are the signs of a genuine, strong hope?

Abiding Presence

The first sign of a genuine hope has to be the presence of God at the point of need. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” (Romans 5:5) Just as the individual Christian has hope because of the abiding presence of God through the Holy Spirit, so communities can experience hope because of the abiding activity of God evidenced through his people, the Church.

During my first week as a resident of Five Points, my house was vandalized twice in three days. I still remember sitting in that ransacked living room, possessions gone, shivering with fear. But when my club kids arrived the next day, guess what they said? “Now you understand, Ted. Now you’re one of us.” That’s when I realized the importance of living in the ‘hood. If they could see God’s love in me, they might also see, as “one of them,” that they too could experience God’s great love.

Too often our focus on God’s love for individuals blinds us from the fact that God really loves the city! To the exiles he said, “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (Jeremiah 29:7) To Jonah he cried, “But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people. . . Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11) Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19). And Paul, in obedience to his calling, planted churches in cities across the then known world.

Churches. “Frankly, I don’t get along with many of the pastors in our community,” a friend recently shared. “They and their people drive in with their fancy cars, do their “worship” thing, and then leave. The kids in the ‘hood? They have nothing to do with them.” He’s right. The church, God’s people, is God’s chosen agency through which he impacts society. “The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14) Only when the church chooses to dwell in poor communities can hope become real.

So hope in the city begins when the people of God, the church, make the city their home.

Life as School

Recently, in a sermon, I challenged the people of Jubilee to take an unflinching look at the hard-to-accept realities of their lives. "Maybe someone dear to you has died. Perhaps there is a terminal illness. Are you in an impossible relationship? Look at it! Then, with eyes fixed, say these words: THIS. . .IS. . .SCHOOL!"

Sound harsh? Paul must have shocked some folks when he said, "Not only (do we rejoice in hope), but we also rejoice in our sufferings. . ." (Romans 5:3) God takes no pleasure in pain, nor does he expect that of us. But there is a purpose. Athlete's cry "No pain, no gain!" Suffering, although painful, produces strengths that lead to hope. ". . .because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." (Romans 5:4) Or, as John Perkins has said, "That which does not defeat me makes me stronger." It is the presence of such strengths as perseverance, proven character, and the ability to rejoice in the midst of suffering, both in individuals and the church, that bring hope to a community.

The young people I have known, who are today growing strong in faith and life, are not trophies. "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God." (II Corinthians 3:5) They are fellow heirs of God's grace, proof that God can mend that which was broken, beacons of hope to others in need.

Recently the Whittier Community Association chose Neighborhood Ministries as one of three recipients of a \$1,000.00 award. At the presentation they spoke of our longevity and visible impact in the lives of youth. In struggling to understand why a civic organization would support a church-based ministry, I remembered Jesus' words: "You are the salt of the earth. . . You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:13f) Signs of hope are in our community. And that is as it should be.

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