

A MATURE HOPE

There will be three devotionals published per week on Thursdays, meant to be read on Friday, Monday, and Wednesday. They will also be posted on the church website, firstchurchgrandhaven.com.

Meant for Maturity

Devotional for Friday by Pastor Tom Pettinga

Read: Hebrews 5:12-24

The cabin we were staying in recently had another resident. It was perched in the tall spruce tree outside the cabin. A barred owlet. Though it was almost two feet tall, with a wingspan of over four feet, it was still dependent on its parent for food. During the daytime, the 'baby' rarely moved, almost hidden from view 25 feet up in the evergreen. But at dusk it began to stir, changing its roosting spot and flapping its wings. And it began to chirp. No hooting yet. Just a rather quiet chirp. I believe it was a call of hunger, because soon I'd hear the hoot-hoot-too-who of the parent owl from a ways away. And then the adult would swoop in on silent wings and begin hunting for its own food and also for food for the owlet.

I was impressed with how large this owlet was. I saw it fly for a short distance. But it still had to be fed. It was not mature enough to feed itself. It got me thinking about my own maturity in terms of feeding on the Word. Am I dependent on what others have studied and learned about the Bible? Or am I feasting on passages, prayerfully reading, rereading, even memorizing sections of scripture?

I realize that some of us are not into reading, period. We'd sooner watch or listen to someone tell us about the Bible. Or read someone else's explanation of a passage (like this devotional). That's part of our video-crazed culture right now as well. But first-hand, personal reading of the Bible, led by the Holy Spirit, is the only way a believer can really grow spiritually. And only what you and I learn by a steady diet of Bible reading and memorization can build our spiritual muscles to deal with challenges like those confronting our nation and churches right now.

It's the Word that prepares us to face fear, to respond properly to authority. It's the Word that teaches us about assurance concerning life and death and even disease. The truths from the Bible, when they are internalized, help us get good and angry when necessary and to use our anger in a wise, Christ-like way. And it is God's Good News that we need to be equipped so we can bring it to the hassled, worried people around us.

I pray that you are not relying on Sunday sermons as your sole spiritual meal. And I encourage you to go beyond even these brief weekly devotions. Dive into the meat, the solid food of the Word that has all the nutrients necessary for spiritual maturity. It will build you up in your most holy faith!

It's been weeks since I saw that barred owlet test its wings. I am quite sure that if it has not learned to hunt for its own food by now, it will not survive in the wild. It *cannot* stay immature. Neither can we. Turn to the Savior, the one who often broke bread, gave thanks for it and gave it to people to eat. He'll feed your heart and soul with his truth. He loves you.

Jesus, your words are life itself. Make me to hunger and thirst after it. May I not be satisfied until I have tasted and digested it and made it part of my life. Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more. Help me grow up into you. AMEN.

Hope

Devotional for Monday by Art Tuls

Recently I have seen yard-signs proclaiming, “There is Hope!” I know these signs are a response to the Covid 19 Crisis, and I know these signs point to ultimate hope in Jesus Christ. I also know hope is important for all people.

What I don’t know is the basis for the hope of many in our culture, including the President, who recently said that the Corona Virus will go away by itself. Other reasons for people to have hope these days might be these: American genius and spirit; the collaboration of many nations, all working together; trust in scientific research and development.

I believe the basis for one’s hope makes hope stronger, or weaker. For example, many folks regularly buy lottery tickets. They hope each time they have bought a winner! But they base their hope on luck or chance. When they do not win, are they crushed? No. Because their hopes were weak to begin with—we all know chances of winning the lottery are tiny.

It’s also true that some hopes may be insignificant, like hoping for pizza for supper. Or hopes can run deep, like awaiting test results from the doctor and hoping they come back negative.

And then there is the deepest and most important hope: that the Lord God Almighty is with me, that he cares for me, and that nothing is stronger than His love. But on what or on whom is this hope based? Why hold on to this hope? Is it a matter of luck or blind fate? The simplest answer to this question is this: “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” My hope is built on what Jesus has done and on what His Word says.

A clear example of such hope is found in the precious poetic words of David in Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd, so
I will not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside quiet waters.
He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of
the shadows of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff comfort me.

You prepare a table for me
in the presence of my enemies!
You anoint my head with oil.

My cup runs over!
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Why do we hang on to an ancient poem like Psalm 23? Because Jesus died on the cross to heal the wounds of the world. And Jesus rose from the dead to prove his victory over sin and death. This is history. Like he himself said,

“I am the good shepherd
who lays down his life for his sheep...
I know my sheep and my sheep know me....
I have come so they will have life, life to the full.”

On him our hope is built. On him our hope rests. As the writer of Hebrews put it so well: “We have this hope as an anchor for our souls!”

And so, brothers and sisters, be encouraged in your faith, solidify your hope; follow the good shepherd. Depend on him, whatever the circumstance, whether it is the threat of a virus or any disease, worry about a loved one, or even when you have your doubts. None of this changes what Jesus has done, or the promises of His word. Remember, after all is said and done, we will dwell in the house of the LORD forever! He holds us and the future securely in His Hands!

The Power of Touch

Devotional for Friday by Pastor Tom Pettinga

Read: Luke 8:44-46; Luke 5:12, 13

The stories have been breaking my heart. Ted told me his mother had been confined to her room for over two months in the retirement home and she was lonely and angry and very frustrated. Ron said that his aged mother was coping with being shut in her nursing home room — but barely!

The hardest story for me to hear was from Jim. He was walking slowly down our street. Just a few months ago, he would have been walking hand-in-hand just as slowly with Barb, his wife of over 60 years. But now he is alone. Barb has Alzheimer's and is confined to a memory unit a few miles away. She might as well be 100 miles away. Jim told me he could see Barb through a window for a few minutes, three days a week. He said, "I haven't touch her in 107 days. I'm slowly losing my wife. This is awful." I asked if I could pray for him and Barb. I wondered if prayer, powerful as it is, was enough. I still wonder.

Not being able to touch each other. Being, by government mandate, unable to touch each other. And enduring these rules when we most need the power of touch — this is unbelievably tragic! It is one thing to cover our mouths and noses. It is quite another to be continually told you are either untouchable or that you may be too contaminated to touch others. Especially your aged spouse or parent or friend. Or grandchild.

Jesus used touch repeatedly — to feed, to heal, to bring the dead to life. In doing so, as with the lepers and the dead, he contaminated himself, made himself physically and ceremonially unclean. That never deterred him. His touch obviously had miraculous power to bring life and restore health. But I believe your touch is powerful as well. There are tens of thousands of nerve endings in your skin to detect the least amount of pressure or sensation, but each of your fingertips has 3,000 such nerve endings! Your hands were created to touch! Your skin was created to *be* touched.

So some questions. Am I willing to not only pray against the virus that makes touch dangerous, but to risk touching, not to defy government, but to bring healing and care? Will I risk becoming sick, for the sake of caring for others? And will I obey the command of Jesus to his followers in Matthew 10:8, that we are to cleanse lepers and heal the sick? I hope that we have not forsaken the Biblical truth that believers can ask for the spiritual gift of healing, that we can experience the power and authority of the Holy Spirit coming down on us for healing — healing even those afflicted with COVID-19. I believe there is still healing power in our touch!

I am not sure my neighbor Jim is afraid to die. I doubt that he is. But he's dying right now. For lack of touch. So is Barb. I encourage you: use any opportunity you have to reach out and touch others around you, in the name of Jesus. Unending, virus-free health is never promised us. The power of touch is. It demonstrates faith in Jesus. It demonstrates his love. It may well bring his healing power.

Dearest Loving Lord, you touched contagious lepers and they were cleansed and healed. You touched the bier holding the widow's dead boy, and he lived again. Come to our neighborhood, our state, our nation, your world. Come with your touch. Come through *our* touch. Bring healing. Bring your care. Bring your miracles. We're desperate. We long for your touch. AMEN.