



**From the Community Pulpit**  
**“40 Days of HOPE:**  
**A Lenten Adventure”**

Text: Matthew 6:7-13

**Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill**

**Ash Wednesday, February 6, 2008**

Prelude to the “THE LORD’S PRAYER - For Such a Time as This Lenten sermon series  
7:00 am , 12 Noon, & 7:00 pm (Chapel)

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## **Text: Matthew 6:7-13**

7 "And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. 10 Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread; 12 And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors; 13 And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen."

### **I. The Need of Hope Everywhere**

In the soup kitchen line. At the bus stop. Among executives in corporate board rooms. On a team like the New England Patriots that came oh-so close to winning it all and now languish in the off-season as “might-have-beens.” In the eyes of first graders on their way to the first day of school. In the cancer institute waiting room. In the eyes and arms and hearts of the parents of a newborn. In the contented smile of the grandparent. What do all these instances of life have in common? I’m glad you asked that question. They are all occasions for hope.

Hope, in part or principally, is what drew you here this day for the “Imposition of Ashes” and its precious reminder of God’s presence in your life and in the world. Regardless of whether your candidate won last night’s contest on “Super Duper (Fat) Tuesday,” there is hope for each and all of us. Today is Super Wednesday, otherwise known as Ash Wednesday.

Hope is a powerful dynamic. There were

once two patients in a hospital room. One was a terminally ill cancer patient. The other a man who had been severely injured by an explosion. Because of the impact of the explosion, he had immense bandages covering his entire face. When he awoke from the surgery that had saved his life, including his eye sight, he was shocked and despairing because he couldn’t see. His roommate reassured him he was going to be all right, echoing the talk he had heard from the surgeons, the hospitalist, the nurses, and the other medical personnel who had come into the room. The bandaged man was sorely afraid he had been maimed for life and that life might not be worth living. But the terminally ill cancer patient told him otherwise, using a particular and peculiar mode of encouragement.

Each morning and throughout the day, the cancer patient would describe for his bandaged roommate what was going on outside their hospital room window. He’d describe the weather, the growth of the trees and the flowers, the flights of the birds, what the fountain looked like across the expanse of the park that stretched out for three blocks. The bandaged man grew more and more positive as his stay in the hospital grew longer and longer. And eventually his will to live fully returned.

When he was confident about life again,

however, his roommate entered into his final days of his cancer battle. And then he died, in peace, contented and fulfilled. For the bandaged man, this was a loss that hit him deeply. But because of great encouragement from his roommate, despite the dying and the sense of loss, he knew he would prevail.

Eventually they came to remove the bandages from the man's head. Off came all the gauze and the strips of hygienic cloth, and he could see. It was, understandably, an unsettling thing to see again, and it took a while to get adjusted. When he could finally focus and keep from squinting at everything around him, he turned to look outside and see the big beautiful world his roommate had described for him so encouragingly. He went to the window and was shocked to discover that the view from his window was of a brick wall a mere ten feet away. His roommate had been using his powerful imagination to buoy up his hospital buddy. His roommate had painted a picture of an alternative world view so that the man could maintain his hope.

## **II. 40 Days of Lent = 40 Days of Hope**

This Lenten season I invite you into an intimate and refreshed encounter with hope. The season of Lent - the 40 days stretching from Ash Wednesday to Easter (minus the Sundays in between, since they aren't regular days but rather "Little Easters") - provides Christians perhaps the richest opportunities for the deepening of faith. This year our theme for the Lenten season is "40 DAYS OF HOPE." It will truly be an adventure as we imbibe in hope every which way. I hope and trust you'll participate in as many of Community's Lenten occasions as you possibly can. Our Lenten program this year really has been designed to provide something for

everybody. And all of us can always use and share and live out more hope.

## **III. Wednesdays – Noon & Evening**

Our Lenten midweek noonday services will offer encouragement and affirmation from a variety of pastors who have close ties to Community, including three of our "Timothies" or "Priscillas," that is, folks we've helped to launch into ministry, like Dr. James Bo Crowe, Jennifer Barrett, Amy Lignitz Harken, as well as folks like former staffer Holly McKissick, our Regional Minister Paul Diehl, and our very own Rev. Kelli Driscoll. All of these Community friends will center their proclamations on the theme of "*Living Hopefully.*"

Then you're invited to be inspired by some of the most powerful preachers from the ecumenical community as the Lenten Wednesday evening services focus on the theme of "*The God of Hope.*"

## **IV. Two Urgent Invitations**

As we listen and take in the various perspectives on "*Living Hopefully*" and "*The God of Hope*," I have two urgent invitations for us. First, let what you learn about hope be expressed in hope-filled service to others. During the Lenten season, we're asking all Community members (and friends) to perform eight hours (or more) of volunteer service. The eight hours may include your regular volunteer service, or it may be something new. Whatever your activity, please inform the church office of your efforts so that we can track the number of hours. Children and youth are especially encouraged to participate in this exciting opportunity. (Our youth and children may pick up their "Figure 8" sheets at church, beginning this coming Sunday. Can you imagine what sort of

impact Community could have in a mere six-week period, if each of us exerted enough hope-filled effort for eight hours of volunteer service?! It would surely amount to enough hours for eight persons' worth of annual labor!

Or you may want to participate in the "Monday Night at Micah Ministries" blitz event on March 3, when we are seeking 50 Community members to provide hope-filled service to the men, women and children who frequent the halls of Independence Blvd. Christian Church at their Micah Ministries there. Or you may want to start your dreaming and making your plans for the Youth Mission Trip to the the Heiffer Project headquarters in Perryville, Arkansas. This will be a wonderful time of serving and modeling Jesus Christ with people who touch lives all around the world.

Secondly, participate in the Sunday evening Bible study gatherings on Feb. 17, Feb. 24, March 2, and March 9. We'll gather in members' homes for Bible study, fellowship and a discussion of N.T. Wright's great book, *The Lord and His Prayer*. A study guide will be available for all participants. These four consecutive Sunday evenings of concentrated Bible study will enrich your understanding of the Lord's Prayer as it relates to your faith, and the connections with other Community members will strengthen your friendships. (To sign up or to host one of the Sunday evenings, please contact the church office.)

I offer these urgent invitations not merely as advertisements, which they unabashedly are! But I also urge your participation in all the worship, study, and service opportunities, because, to borrow the unique phrase from Father Divine, the famed New York City preacher of a previous generation, it is only when we "tangibilitate" our faith that it truly becomes

a holy encounter. So I urge you: "tangibilitate" what you learn about The Lord's Prayer and your commitments to living a life of hope by actually being involved in study and service.

## **V. Hope in All Things, Places, Times**

And remember: Hope is not only a viable option among a cafeteria array of life choices. Hope is an essential minimum daily requirement for living out our faith as Christians.

Hope is a signal virtue that the apostle Paul placed among the top three, along with faith and love. Hope soothes us when we mourn. Hope, the best hope, the right kind of hope, fulfills us when we are achieving great heights. Hope is in both locker rooms after the Super Bowl and in all after-election sessions of all candidates. Hope is with you no matter what grade you receive in school or in the existential academy of experience. Hope is in the eyes and the hearts of the newly engaged and in the souls of the newly diagnosed. Hope is in the feet of the toddler taking first steps, and in the hands of the great-grandmother rubbing a treasured wedding band.

Now back to that newly sighted man who discovered that his window view really gazed out on a brick wall. Was that fake stuff? Is this what hope is, merely wishing thinking? A deception operation? No, far from it. What the cancer patient gave his bandaged buddy was a glimpse of what real life truly is and can be, maybe not at his window's edge but certainly far beyond. Through the power of imagination he reminded him of the preciousness of life and living. And in so doing gave him an immense gift, hope.

So, I have some suggestions for increasing your hope this Lenten season:

- (1) ***Jumpstart your imagination*** and stretch the possibilities of your own growth, knowing that one of the best ways to do that within your own faith and life is to extend such increase in imagination in the lives of others.
- (2) Increase the quality of your life with a ***media fast*** once a week for three hours. That's right turn off your computer, your cell phone, your Ipod, your Shuffle, the television, the radio. No paper, movies, magazines, or tabloids at the checkout stand. Why? Because of the scandalous hopelessness which far too much of our media purveys. We have way too much of the wrong kind of information that doesn't magnify your hopefulness.
- (3) ***Intentionally pray The Lord's Prayer three times a day***, morning noon and night. And pray it with an ear toward what God might be saying to you, instead of concentrating on what you are attempting to say to God. Listen, in other words, for the meanings and messages that are intended by the Divine for your own growth in grace. Listen specifically for how hope is held out to you in all aspects of your life. Listen carefully for Jesus' hopefulness when he bequeathed the prayer to his first followers. All people addressing God as "*Our Father...*" That's hope! "*Daily bread*" for everyone." That's hope! "*Forgiveness of sins*" and the power for us to forgive the sins of others. Talk about hope! The capacity to say "*lead us not into temptation*" and the avoidance of evil. Hope again! And perhaps the greatest expression of hopefulness in the entire prayer: "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" Hope! Hope! Hope!

I'm convinced that if you do this, you will live out your hopefulness in new, life-transforming ways, as the following

acronym suggests. As you receive the imposition of ashes, allow the four points of the cross-shaped smudge on your forehead to remind you about:

***H - Holiness*** - The holiness of doing what Shakespeare charges us to do: "Speak what we feel and not what we ought to say." In other words, the Holiness of authentic relationships. And the holiness that is potentially within you since you have been made in the image of God.

***O - Openheartedness*** - There is a crying need for this quality in our land and throughout the world. A new day can be dawning in your own life, no matter how long or short our time may be, to live fully, if we will but live with open hearts.

***P - Power*** - Power is a gift that Lent offers, only it comes to us counterintuitively. The power of humility and meakness was given by Jesus over and over again to his disciples. This same power is offered to us in our day, through worship, study, service, and fellowship with one another.

***E - Exciting Enthusiasm*** - This is always my hope for us at Community. The Christian faith is a journey to a greater and more enhanced experience of enthusiasm and excitement, ultimately resulting in joyfulness. To take God into our lives fully, *en-theos* - this is what *enthusiastic* faith is all about. To be excited - really excited! - is what Christ always wants for those who would walk in his way.

Have a great Lent. Know that there is hope enough for us all. And know, too, that I love you. AMEN.