

“Hope: Love and Joy Combined”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 7/14/19

Last night Ruth and I had the unique opportunity to sit under the night’s sky, seeing the full moon and visible planet of Mars, unhindered by city lights—while out in Bedford county celebrating with Shaykh Rashid’s World Community, as they commemorated their 40th year of their organization Legacy International and the Global Youth Village—a summer camp for up and coming adolescent leaders from countries all over the world who learn the value of cooperation, tolerance, love and respect, and the goal of peace. Many of you know Shaykh Rashid and some from his spiritual community. You know them as Suffi Muslims. But you may not have realized that they started 50 years ago as a Hindu Ashram, and Shaykh Rashid was their yogi. They are currently one of the longest surviving spiritual communities still living together in the U.S., and Legacy International is their nonpartisan, nonreligious arm that fosters peace throughout the world as an NGO and nonprofit, and after hearing testimony after testimony last night from people all over the world, I would say they have been wildly successful.

However, it was the feature performance of former student and now staff member Arjun Verma, son of famous Sitar master Roop Verma. The sitar is an ancient 3 string instrument from India that some say has been around for as long as 6,000 years. The late Roop Verma, Arjun’s father had been a close friend of Shaykh Rashid’s and his community for more than 30 years, and this would be Arjun’s turn to bless the community with his sitar performance, and it was magical. I had not realized that the sitar is much, much more than a mere instrument. For the Hindu community and the spiritual mystics of South and Central Asia, the sitar is a portal into something much more divine, much more celestial, where the notes produced carry with it a connection with God. It acts as a bridge, with each melodic tone transporting you to another plain of spiritual awareness, and as Arjun played, I was carried away. Just before playing, Arjun paid homage to the Global Youth Village and Legacy International, and the line that struck me to the core I will summarize as this: he said, “When I feel like there is no hope left in the world and all is lost, I remember Legacy and then I know there is still hope.”

What a powerful statement. And we can replace it with anyone of our names. Well I at least hope we can. “When I feel like there is no hope left in the world and all is lost, I remember _____ and then I know there is still hope.” Can your name fit into that blank? Can our spiritual community fit into that blank? Would people say that about us?

Jesus did something extraordinary in the teaching that we read earlier about the “good Samaritan.” I hate the title of that story. It’s like saying “the good Jew” or “the good American.” It gives off the idea that this one person is the exception. However, Jesus proved that in relation to the Samaritans, “good” was a common occurrence, but his own people group struggled to see it. Jesus played on the racism and religious sectarianism of his day with this story. He started on a foundation of a single premise that all could agree on: God requires that we love our neighbor. When the man responded to Jesus with a question as to who exactly constitutes as “his” neighbor. Jesus dug into the deepest, darkest parts of the heart of his own people: To the fears and xenophobic nooks and crannies of their very souls.

I like to believe that Jesus probably did not reveal the identity of this “good neighbor” in his story, until the very end. Though the account we have has it at the beginning, good storytelling would have it at the end—and I like to think that Jesus was an expert storyteller. Jesus created the villains in his story out of the religious leaders his day, perhaps even implicating the very person who was asking the question in

the first place. However, his audience was not the religious leaders as much as the common folks, who immediately identified with the poor, beaten up, robbed person on the side of the road, left for dead. They also, surely, related to the compassionate passerby who had mercy on the victim in this story, despite being rejected by the religious leaders. Most likely, believing that Jesus probably held back the identity of the merciful traveler, it gave the audience time to project their own persona on that nice traveler, to identify themselves as that character—for Jesus had already slighted the religious leaders in his story—so surely they, the common folk, were the victors, the champions. Again, good storytelling, right? Let the audience get invested in the narrative, fall in love with the hero.

Then at the end, as I and others suspect, Jesus reveals the identity of the protagonist: A Samaritan. This probably made the crowd who were by then deeply in love with the story's hero, now sick to their stomachs. "Why?" you may ask. Why would this be a major twist to the story? Because the Samaritans were a hated people group. They were a different race. They had a different culture, a different language, different accents, a different smell, a different way of dressing, and a different religion. They were in fact, less than: The servant class. Even for the poor and oppressed Jews that made up the bulk of Jesus' following, these Samaritans were below them—and Jesus loved them. And I mean loved them so much that he didn't try to convert them to Judaism. You mean if you love someone, you don't try to convert them? Yes, I mean if you love someone truly, you respect their spiritual path and honor it, protect it, and yes love it alongside your own. In John 4, Jesus had the opportunity to convert the Samaritan woman at the well to his Jewish faith, but chose not to, in fact encouraged her not to by saying, "God desires true worshippers who worship in spirit and in truth." He was not interested in her getting her religion "right" as much as fostering her path to be an honest one that valued the spirit and truth, and this was a direct response to the woman's question about whose religion is "right."

Later in John 8, religious leaders seek to shame Jesus publicly by calling him a "crazy Samaritan." Yes, they call him that, though he looked Jewish, acted Jewish, dressed Jewish, obviously came from Jewish lineage, spoke their language, had their accent, etc. BUT undoubtedly loved the Samaritans and spent so much time with them by that point, that in order to shame Jesus, the religious leaders chose to call him a "crazy Samaritan." And you know what Jesus' response was. "I'm not crazy." However, did you notice he didn't say, "I'm not Samaritan." When people call you the "immigrant lover" because you love your neighbor, or a "snowflake" because you don't support killing people, or a "Gay-lover" because you support equal rights, and so on... what will your response be? Choose your words wisely. I believe Jesus did. He considered it an honor to be lumped in with the Samaritans, and we should be too. Anytime we are lumped in with the "least of these" or those who are suffering most in our society, then we should know that we are doing something right. We truly love another. We value them and their path, and want nothing but to support them, and come alongside them, and to bring them joy. Remember what Arjun said, "When I feel like there is no hope left in the world and all is lost, I remember _____ and then I know there is still hope." Hope is love and joy combined. If we cannot smile and demonstrate a joy with our work, then where is the fun, literally, in being human? Being human comes with it qualities of happiness when living our call. We work inwardly so we can live outwardly. Our inward journey feeds our outward, and often vice versa. So, can you count your name couched neatly within Arjun's statement? "When I feel like there is no hope left in the world and all is lost, I remember _____ and then I know there is still hope." If not, then there is still work to be done. Please join us after church at 12:30 for about an hour and a half discussion on "call." How is God calling you, what path has your creator put you on? Don't be afraid to be the hope that this world desperately needs. Shalom