

So, I've been thinking a lot about hope this week. And why it's not a word I use much, anymore. In fact, I'd say I've given up hope. And I don't say that lightly, either. I'm probably not supposed to say this, as your pastor. But I ask you to hear me out on this.

Hope and I had a rough breakup this year. For any of you Simpsons fans out there, you might remember the episode many years ago where Lisa Simpson tells a little boy, Ralph, that she doesn't like him back. Bart replays the video of that moment back to Lisa, saying, "Look, you can actually pinpoint the second that his heart rips in ½." If you rewind and replay the news a week or so, I can pinpoint the moment that my heart ripped open, the moment when Hope broke up with me: the moment I watched the video of Philando Castile's death, as calmly filmed by his girlfriend, Lavish Reynolds. Some load-bearing beam within me just collapsed. And I have wanted to just sit in my anger and tears and resentment for anybody who wasn't crying out just as desperately.

It was my realization that no, *really*, some lives don't matter until it's too late, if then. And my own family is not safe in this world. No, really. And I do not see it getting better, and no, I can't help anyone else feel hopeful right now. The word "hope" feels more like a Band-Aid for fatigue & guilt, not really about a just future.

I'm going to share three stories today that have helped me navigate the landscape out beyond "hope" and find a way through this time when there really seems to be no way. First, I have realized out here in the land of No-Hope, that I am far from alone here, & my company is not just those who've given up. I would argue that our tradition – both the broader Judeo-Christian we come out of, and the Mennonite tradition specifically, is not what it is, and did not do what it did, out of HOPE. Our ancestors of faith were not motivated by a certainty that they could change the world, but by a commitment to BE the change they wished for; they weren't waiting for the world to get better, or the forecast for justice to get more sunny. They acted out of faith, justice, love and mercy.

This land is also peopled by people in deep lament. Oddly, one of the most hopeful sounds to my ears these days is true lament. Because I don't know any other starting point for just action that

could be based in reality than true lament. Today's scripture is the first story of Life-Beyond-Hope. In this story, Abraham finds out that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, where his nephew Lot lives, are going to be consumed by fire and brimstone, because the Lord had heard an outcry against them. Current scholarship asserts that the sins of Sod & Gomorrah were actually to do with hospitality, the lack thereof, rather than homosexuality, though it's been used as a clobber text there for years. They did not welcome strangers that came into their midst, nor did they honor the vulnerable members within their group. The story does not revolve around the worthiness of the inhabitants of the city, nor is it about Abraham choosing the wise course of action. This was all foolishness AND faithfulness, as they so often go together. This is someone crying out for mercy on behalf of others, against all odds. Someone believing enough in Mercy and Justice of God, to demand mercy and justice here and now.

I'll return more to this story, but for now, want to share with you a piece that appeared in *The Mennonite* a week or so ago. It's written by Regina Shands Stoltzfus, who is African-American and Mennonite, and who has done extensive work on anti-oppression efforts in our denomination. I'm going to read a large excerpt of her piece, because I want her words, as she chose them, to have as wide an audience as possible. She begins her reflection by noting that one of the taillights of her car is broken, and that her 20-year-old black son drives this car, so she is frantic to fix it so that he isn't pulled over, because she knows he is not safe. Now, in her words:

A few weeks ago, I had a conversation with a perfectly nice and well-meaning young white man. He explained to me how much easier it was for him to understand racism, and be motivated to work against it after having developed a friendship with neighbors who are people of color. The young white man explained to me that it was this friendship that really helped him understand, and care more about racism. The love and affection he and his family had for their neighbors – the meals and the stories they have shared – had done far more than any anti-racism training or other educational piece had done. He was making the argument that absent of personal relationships, we cannot advance the fight against racist oppression. I used to believe this too. When I first started doing anti-racism work, I leaned heavily on the power of personal relationships. I still believe in their power. I believe in the power of love. I believe, as a follower of Jesus, that I am called to love. *However, the systemic nature of oppression means that oppression functions despite the good will, intentions, and yes, the love, of many, many people. And at the end of the day I am more interested in my son coming home alive than I am with someone learning to love him.* I said as much to the young man. I affirmed his friendship with his

neighbors, and tried to convey with my words that I did not belittle the transformative power of that relationship. But in 2016 America, if I have to choose between being loved and being treated with justice, I'm going to choose justice. If my son gets stopped for a traffic violation, I can't hope that the officer who stops him loves someone who looks like him. I can and do know that the public at large, not just police officers, but educators, employers, people just walking down the street – has been socialized to view my Black son as a threat, as a criminal. *I recognize that my words are limiting “love” to a feeling, and that the biblical command to love is much more profound than a feeling. This reflects my belief that the willingness to love across the boundaries of difference and the weight of history has not sufficiently met the biblical command.* Can you affirm my humanity and my right to exist without loving me; that is, having warm feelings about me? What if I'm not lovable that day? Do you get to mistreat me then? Do I have to prove my love-ability – my worthiness of your love – over and over and over again? Or do I just get to be? These are serious questions. At a traffic stop for a burned-out headlight, I can't gamble on love. *So you see, well-meaning friends of all colors – it's going to take more than love to change this. Those of you who love me and mine – I see you. I appreciate you. And I love you back. Those of you who don't yet love me or just don't – you don't have to. But you can still co-create a world with me that reeks of justice instead of despair. And frankly, I'd rather have you pay attention to that.* Beloved, yes, let us love one another. But today, my siblings, understand we cannot wait on your love if it is limited to feeling warmly about us.

I am so grateful for Regina Shands Stoltzfus's words. So grateful that they were printed in the pages of *The Mennonite*, a publication of our denomination. So grateful for her speaking the truth of the clear & present danger of being black in the U.S., for her clear call to remember that, ultimately, it would be great 'n all if we all learned to love and like each other, but in the meantime, and FAR MORE IMPORTANT is the necessity of her son and all black people coming home alive every day in this country. So grateful to hear her make that nuance between “love as a feeling” and true love. Because I think my unrequited love affair with Hope, is actually about the *feeling* of hope, and the expectation to produce it on cue for others, rather than my relationship with Hope itself.

The third story I'll share is one I think I've told here before, but like most good stories, it bears repeating. When my grandmother Irene Gascho was a young woman, she fell in love with a Midwestern farm boy, and they married and started their life together. Tragically, he died when they were newlyweds of only a few months. It was only after his death that she found out she was pregnant. Months later, as a young widow, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl. And she named that little girl, born of a shattered dream, Hope. Hope. For her, hope was not a passive desire,

something to happen to her. Hope was a reality to nurture and love into life, a name she gave to something she was embarking on in the face of an uncertain future.

Hope is a great-grandmother now. She is my Aunt Hope. Older half-sister to my father. Mother to Janet Lind, grandmother to Isaac Esh. She was surrounded by her extended family just last summer to celebrate her 80th birthday. My grandmother, Irene, which means Peace, by the way, nurtured Hope into being, as an act of resistance and persistence in the face of a hopeless situation. That is hope to hold onto. Not the outcome of an election. Not whether or not anyone else is doing or saying what *I* think they should be doing or saying to make the world a more just place. What these three stories have in common: Abraham arguing with God for more mercy, Regina Shands Stoltzfus' op-ed, the birth and naming of my Aunt Hope is that they ALL speak of meaningful action in a time of no apparent hope.

Sodom and Gomorrah was not ultimately saved. But Abraham spoke up for Sodom and Gomorrah. Pleaded, anyway. Abraham was so full of passion, compassion and mercy that he argued for a people, despite their guilt, despite their probable destruction, despite no reasonable expectation of results; he did not allow his hopelessness to paralyze him, but to spur him to greater advocacy. *When was the last time I prayed on anyone's behalf this way?* *When was the last time you prayed on anyone's behalf this way?* I know I haven't been praying to God this way over the situations that are breaking my heart.

But there is inspiration in Abraham's example here. I can choose to nurture some unlikely "seed of hope" to quote a phrase from Chad's sermon 2 weeks ago within my heart and mind and body in this season of my own despair and hopelessness over the safety of my husband and daughters and extended family as my Grandma Irene Gascho did. I can nurture that seed and protect it and bring it to life, although it's hard to imagine having the audacity to name it Hope, as she did! And Regina Shands Stoltzfus gives me the powerful reminder that even if I can't get the world to like or love the people I love enough to keep them safe, that I can still demand justice on their behalf. And I won't stop doing it, no matter how

hopeless it seems. I will not tie my efforts to their likelihood of success. I will bet all that I have and am on this underdog of Mercy and Justice for all. Jesus gave his life, knowingly, against all odds. Abraham, Regina Shands Stoltzfus, my grandmother: didn't act because they had hope. They gave birth to it through their words and actions.

So I cannot promise you that it's all going to get better. That you should keep up your fights for peace & justice because they will ultimately prevail. I won't say things just to make you *feel* better, because that would not be good news, anyway. But I can sure as heck fight for it. I can choose to be energized by the very seeming hopelessness, and the necessity of the fight. There is a place out beyond all forced and unfounded *feelings* of hopefulness. A place out beyond all the distracting and deflecting arguments about who deserves what and why. That's where the work of the Kingdom is going on. And that's where you can find me and my broken, hopeless heart. I pray we can all find our way there.