

Abounding in Hope

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Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Romans 15:7-13

A few years ago, a man named Billy Beane reinvented how baseball teams are built. In the doing, he redeemed a team, a city and a bevy of players whose careers otherwise were headed to an end. Perhaps some of you have seen that story in movie theaters as told in the film, Moneyball. The film is based on a 2003 book by the same name. The story goes something like this:

The Oakland Athletics, once one of the game's great teams, had been victimized by the merger of capitalism and baseball. Teams in big cities, such as the New York Yankees, had found so many ways to make money that they could afford to buy the best players. Small-market teams, such as the one in Oakland, had payroll one-third the size of their big-city competitors.

That's when a nerd with a giant brain, a powerful computer and a passion for the game met Billy Beane. He convinced Beane they could build a winning team out of overlooked players. They scrutinized and analyzed player statistics and uncovered great ballplayers everyone else had written off. Together, they changed the game.

The film Moneyball is winning at the box office. Perhaps because it stars Brad Pitt. But I think there are other reasons. Like the Bad News Bears and Seabiscuit, Moneyball is a story of redemption. We all love a redemption story, a come-from-behind epic that reminds us that success – however we define it – doesn't always automatically go to the fastest or strongest or the biggest.

I have to admit that the Moneyball story reminds me a lot of Caldwell church. Not that long ago, Caldwell was the Oakland A's of Presbyterian churches, maybe all churches, in Charlotte. Once a powerhouse for God, the tables turned against it. A variety of factors conspired to push this old church to the brink of existence. Demographics and city growth patterns intertwined with long-time trends in the Protestant and Presbyterian traditions and other factors led to a long decline. By 2006, every reasonable observer concluded this part of the body of Christ had run and finished the race in its service of Christ.

Then, a redemption. Not one based on power-computing, statistical analysis and sabermetrics. It was, rather one of grace and providence, born out in the steadfast devotion of one group of believers who sought to be church together, again, and another group who loved their church so much they let go and let God.

You know the rest. With God's guidance, those two groups created a space that attracted a steady stream of newcomers. Now Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church faces its centennial next year with energy and momentum, verve and vision, optimism and opportunities for ministry in the name of Christ that no one foresaw. Our campus buzzes with life in service to others 24-7-365. Our members and friends give and give of themselves to be the hands and feet of Christ. You extend love and care and encouragement to each other and to others, all out of surprise and joy that they have found a church, one that, perhaps, fits what you've been looking for for a while. Thanks be to God.

Today, we begin our season of collective discernment about our individual discipleship. If you haven't already, you will receive a packet in the mail in the next day or two. It includes a snapshot of the church's financials, which are sound. You will also find a booklet that summarizes 60 different ministries of this church, where you can serve God in joyful response to what Caldwell means to you. It also includes a pledge card for your financial support for the church in 2012. ... so we can pay the light bill, keep the roof patched and the pastors paid.

This year, your Discipleship Committee, with the support of the session, has set a goal it thinks is achievable, though some might think it crazy: one-hundred percent participation. I happen to agree that goal is reasonable and achievable.

The goal says nothing about how much money you can afford to give to God or how much time you have to serve in one of the church's ministries. It only asks that you make a promise, a pledge to give back, that you make a concrete commitment of your time and talent and of your financial treasure in response to the promise that God has made to you. That is a divine promise and a pledge that nothing can ever separate you from God's love and grace. How can we not respond to that promise with a promise of our own?

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The promise of the love of God in Christ Jesus – its depth and breadth and reach to all – is the subject of the book of Romans in the New Testament. This letter of the Apostle Paul's spoke powerfully to its first readers, bearing a message of hope and unity amid

diversity. It speaks with equal power to us today at a time when we so desperately need to hear those things and believe that, in Christ, they are possible.

Romans is, of course, one of the richest books of all of the Bible's sixty six. Scholars, theologians, preachers and teachers have mined it for meaning and direction and inspiration century after century. The central message Paul had for the church at Rome was to open their doors to all who know – or want to know - the love of God in Christ. For Paul's readers, that meant that Jew and gentile alike were covered by the grace of God and that God's church was not to draw lines between one ethnicity and another.

In chapter 15, Paul begins to wrap up this message with a summary of the gospel itself. We are all redeemed by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. In that redemption, Paul says, we are unified as one and the same people, the children of God. God welcomes all into God's divine embrace. In Christ, who gave all access to salvation, we are redeemed, forgiven, and, at the same time, we are unified as God's agents in the world.

It was a radical idea in Paul's day. It may sound even more radical today. That in Christ, we all are one – Jew and gentile in Paul's day, yes, but also the rest of rebellious humanity, all who fail God in sin. In Christ, who died for all, we see just how expansive God's intent for peace in the world really is, Paul says, just how wide is God's mercy and just how deep is God's forgiveness for the world. In Christ, God's love is that inclusive.

So, Paul says, we are to welcome one another, just as God welcomes all in Christ.

And we are to be people of hope, no small hope, mind you, but a hope that abounds. So, says Paul Achtemier, a great scholar of Union Presbyterian Seminary, God's sovereignty over the world "may be greeted with happy anticipation rather than fear-filled foreboding because we know the nature of God's plan. It is mercy and forgiveness and peace."<sup>1</sup>

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How then can we not be people who, as Paul says, abound in hope?

At Caldwell, I see the signs of that hope every day as I work alongside you in the world. Even in the midst of such difficult times in the economy, times that take a toll on so many of you, you are people *of hope* and people who *give hope*.

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<sup>1</sup> Interpretation Commentary on Romans, p. 227

No one here has it made. So many of you face significant challenges – in your health or in your bank account, in uncertainty and anxiety, in your present or out of your past, in your heart-breaking loneliness or in the frenetic pace of your life that leaves you exhausted at the end of every day. Whether you have lingering doubt or rock-solid faith, whether you are new to faith and the church or you spent your life here, whether you have found acceptance or rejection in other churches, whether you go home to a comfortable large home or a small one-room apartment, whether you have too much or not nearly enough, so many of you have hope and you give hope to others.

You give hope to diverse kids in a poor school. You give hope to the guests of Caldwell House or the families of the bilingual preschool. You give hope with a kind word or a card in the mail that simply tells another person that you are thinking of them. You give hope by singing in worship or tackling the never-ending to do list around our buildings and grounds. You give hope with your time and your talent and your treasure.

So today we begin our season of collective discernment about our individual discipleship with Paul's words in Romans 15 as our joyful prayer. From a rainbow of different lives and backgrounds, experiences and outlooks, we have arrived here at the corner of Park and 5<sup>th</sup>. We have found a place where we are redeemed, a place where we walk in unity, as God desires for all of humanity.

How can we NOT be people who abound in hope and who are called to respond with our very lives.

In this season, let us each make a promise to the church in response to God's promise to us, a promise that has already been fulfilled in Christ. With whatever we have to give of our time and talent and treasure, let us live out the benediction that the Apostle Paul gives us in the closing lines of Romans 15:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Amen and Amen.

