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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Jeremiah 32: 9-15; Ephesians 1:17-18; Romans 8:22-25
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Practicing Hope

Today we are going to contemplate the nature of Hope. Hope has been fleeting these last few years with the Covid pandemic that has caused close to one million deaths in our country alone, and with it economic and psychological problems. Our lives were altered during these years, and we lost touch with people we care about. Even though much of our lives have resumed, we live with caution. Many of us are still masked and worries of covid continue to linger. During these years, our country has become more divided and the whole world seems more violent and radical. The atrocities in Ukraine are beyond belief. It shocks us to the core and deeply saddens us to witness this destruction and cruelty in 2022. We see continued violence in Palestine and the Middle East, Africa, Central America, and in Haiti kidnapping and gang violence has increased 70% in the past two years. All of which has caused refugees from all over the world to seek safety. I saw an estimate that there are 82.4 million refugees (1/3 of them children) living in the world today. And then there is global warming threatening the health of our beloved Earth. Where do we find hope in these difficult times?

Sharing the pulpit with me today are two very dear friends from Haiti, who are graduates of our education program and fellow co-workers. Fednor Sidort is our program administrator. He is graduate in business management from the University of Notre Dame in Haiti, and Mendel Mesidor is the chairman of our Advisory Board in Haiti and also is a graduate in business management from Notre Dame. In a few minutes, they will share with us their thoughts about hope and where they find hope in Haiti during this difficult period.

Before we hear from Fednor and Mendel, I want to share with you the wisdom of two young women with whom I greatly admire. I find the wisdom of the youth to be inspirational. They look at the world and its problems with new eyes and fresh ideas that give me hope. The first young woman is Amanda Gorman, the 24-year-old poet, who inspired the nation with her inaugural poem, "The Hill We Climb." She writes in another poem, "We cannot possess hope without practicing it"¹ In other words, the work of hope is a participatory action toward a goal rather than a passive waiting. It is true we must wait patiently for hope to be fulfilled, such as our hope for world peace, but in the meantime, while we are waiting, we need to be engaged in the work of peacemaking.

Amanda Gorman's sentiment is echoed by Greta Thunberg, the greatly admired 19-year-old Swedish environmental activist. Greta in an interview last year on PBS passionately spoke about her year-long voyage in 2019 to meet scientists from many regions of the world in her advocacy for our planet.² She said, "You do not need hope to act, but action creates hope. Once we start to act, hope is everywhere. So instead of looking for hope, look for action and then, only then, hope will come." So instead of being paralyzed by the tragedies of this world, we are called to act in some way that helps the cause to which hope is needed. The action may feel small and insignificant to you, especially if the objective is grandiose in scale such as an end to world

¹ Amanda Gorman. From the poem, "Every Day We Are Learning" from *Call Us What We Carry*, Penguin Random House, 2021, pg. 52

² A 3-part documentary on PBS, "Greta Thunberg: A Year to Change the World." Aired in April 2021.

hunger, an end to the pandemic, an end to racism, or turning global warming around. It is easy to feel hopeless in the face of the enormity of those problems, but there is plenty we can do to bring small changes, and it is the multitude of small changes that add up to Change. In the meantime, we feel more hopeful, because we are participating toward the future solution. Mahatma Gandhi wrote with a similar sentiment, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Here is a small example: In 2014, we initiated a Senior Pilgrim Fellowship program that brought 12 youth and two chaperones to Haiti each April during spring break. We offered arts and crafts to hundreds of children, we helped older youth with their English, visited schools, and played soccer with the local team. It continued for 5 years after which we needed to pause the program due to the political insecurity in Haiti. Each day, we met before dinner to share our feelings and ideas. After the first day, we gathered and many of the youth felt a sense of hopelessness in Haiti: they said the poverty was overwhelming, and the lack of infrastructure and basic needs seemed insurmountable. They felt sad. I affirmed each of their feelings, but at the end of the meeting, I gave them an assignment for the next day -- to find something hopeful, something that gave them joy. The next day after many activities, each person had a wonderful story, experience, or interaction to share. They felt hopeful, they felt they were making a difference in someone’s life. They weren’t going to solve Haiti’s problems, but they made a child giggle, they gave clothing to children, they shared their lives and made new friends, they worked together on a project that was fun for everyone. I saw first-hand their feelings of hopelessness shift to hope through their engagement with the Haitian youth. They no longer felt sad. This pattern was the same for each of the 5 years.

I struggle many times with our work in Haiti. The mission of the Crosby Fund for Haitian Education is ambitious in its scope. It is non other than nation building through education. In Haiti education is not accessible to children at any level. There is no free education, and parents must pay for tuition, books, and uniforms for their children to go to school. Only ½ of the children at the primary level go to school and 15% of the youth graduate from secondary or high school. 2% go on to university or a higher degree. From where will the leaders of Haiti come if the children are not educated? Our scholarship program this year offered 543 scholarships from Pre-K to University. Our work gives me a lot of hope, but there are many times that I get lost in the enormity of the problems, especially in the last few years with the economic collapse and the increased political insecurity. 543 students are a small percentage of the 90,000 children and young adults the region we serve. When I am there, I feel overwhelmed with hundreds of people who are asking for their children to be placed in our program, or they are asking for food, medical help, or money to survive. It feels hopeless, and I spend many a sleepless night from worry. But then a voice in my head reminds me again that change is made one person at a time, and the focus must not be on the big vision but on the small steps along the way. I think about our graduates such as Fednor and Mendel who are married, have children, and their children go to school. The chain of poverty is broken in their family. I try to remember the successes of our work and not be overwhelmed by all that we cannot do and a goal that won’t be realized in my lifetime. The key to striving forward and not giving up is the small steps we take each day.

Fednor and Mendel live in Haiti and must manage their lives in the midst of Haiti’s enormous problems. I have asked them to share a few words with us about where they find their hope. How they manage to keep going forward.

Fednor Sidort:

Greetings to all. I want to say it is a great honor and privilege to be among you today. And in the name of Crosby and all the Crosby students (alumni and current ones) I have to show my gratitude for all the support you in this church have given to us.

I don't think I exaggerate if I say that we Haitian people are survivors, specifically the young students. You may wonder why. In fact, when you watch or read the news, it is needless to say, we live in real hardship. The whole system is in crisis, hit by many disasters and pandemics, a terrible economy, and the assassination of our President. This creates a lack of hope for many young Haitians, who are thinking about their future. Fortunately, this is where the Crosby program comes into our lives and sheds light, hope, dignity, power and much more. I feel hope every time I see another student graduate or another person learn to read and write. My job gives me hope. The time is too short to tell you all the work that we do, but I can mention that the two of us here are finished products of the Crosby program, currently on the labor market, and helping other young in the community to live with optimism and hope thanks to a great system Crosby has established in our country. Thank you again. Seeing you here today gives me hope and our hearts go to you, the American people, and your great nation, and Mr. and Madame Crosby.

Mendel Mesidor:

Today it is a pleasure to visit the community that supports the Crosby program in Haiti. The beneficiaries are very satisfied with your support because education is the key to transforming the world. I take this opportunity to thank you.

The Festi Genie program (an annual scholastic competition between 12 schools) that the Crosby Fund started 5 years ago has changed the level of our education in the municipalities. It is the very first program of this kind in the Artibonite Community. Participating in this program gives me great hope. Our young people give me inspiration. They are very willing to learn and they have great success even though their lives are difficult. Your support has created doctors, administrators, agronomists, accountants, and nurses... they all want to work to help Haiti become a better country and this gives me great hope too.

I have started a program in my community of Liancourt that I call T-2000 with the aim of training one hundred young adults, male and female, in professional activities such as cooking, electrical work, and training to work in beauty salons. These skills will help them prepare for jobs in the future and to be working citizens for our country.

I hope you can hear in Fednor and Mendel's words that hope is found in the work they do and in the difference that their lives make in their community.

The story of Jeremiah we heard this morning is a good example of the way in which hope is found in a crisis. Much like the present-day war in Ukraine at the vicious hands of the Russian army. We find Jeremiah prophesying during the siege of Judea by Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army. The first war was in 597 BC and many Judeans were captured and exiled to Babylon. After 10 years of Babylonian control, the Judeans revolted again and this time the

army destroyed Jerusalem and took many more people into exile. Jeremiah fled as a refugee to Egypt to live out his life there. During this final siege, Jeremiah was called to buy a field. He gave the deed of purchase to Baruch to place in an earthenware jar to preserve it for a long time. Who buys land in the middle of war and imminent exile? This act of hope underscores Jeremiah's determined faith in the future restoration of Judea and the return of the exiles to their homeland. Jeremiah's faith is affirmed when God says to him, "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." This scripture gives me hope for Ukraine and Haiti as well.

I thought of Jeremiah's act of faith and hope a year ago when Ted and I went to the opening of a medical center in Liancourt that one of our graduates Dr. James Kerby Estimé built in his hometown. He bought this land during this difficult time in Haiti and his vision has always been clear. Haitians need to create their own history and participate in the change they wish to see. They cannot give up or become paralyzed by hopelessness, but they must work toward their vision for their country. I am very honored to tell you that this medical center opened last year bears my name, and it gives me profound hope when I think about the many people that this medical center helps each day. It is a symbol of hope for the people of Liancourt to see positive change during this time. Liancourt is the hometown of Mendel as well.

Paul Tillich, a twentieth century Protestant theologian, believes that God created with a goal for creation in mind: an ideal world, a world of perfect unity and love. This creation, in which we are intimately connected, moves towards this completion through time. God's goal for each one of us is to participate in this goal, to imitate God and be creators of positive change too. Hope is God's way of encouraging us to move forward in this goal of an ideal world – to be part of the solution and not part of the problem. When we participate in God's work, we become ourselves vessels of hope, faith, and love.

I have witnessed in our congregation many members who live their lives in the work of practicing hope by stepping forward to work and participate in the many missions of our church. Through our refugee work, our food pantry and soup kitchen ministry, engaging our youth to reach out to their neighbors near to home and around the world, our partnership work in Palestine, the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, South Africa, and Haiti, and our many projects that strive to end racism such as the work of the Witness Stone Project and PARJE: Public Art for Racial Justice Education through its community murals project. Last week we unveiled the new "Welcome" mural in the Lyme-Old Lyme Middle School painted by Jasmine Oyola-Blumenthal with the help of many students from the Lyme- Old Lyme Middle School. The Welcome mural shows a group of young people of all different races and religions holding hands as they cross a stream using steppingstones, each supporting and looking out for one another. It offers a vision of hope as we work together toward equality in this nation. After the unveiling, Thelma Halloran an art teacher in the school and one of the key leaders of this mural project, overheard one student talking to another. Thelma wrote, "As students were waiting for the bell to ring for dismissal, one student said, "I don't get why they have all those different races in mural. We don't have that many in our school." Another student, someone who rarely speaks, responded, "that's why they did it. So that people of all different races would feel welcome when they come to our school." And so, from the moment of the unveiling of the mural the work of conversation began.

Hopelessness crept in as we stayed at home during covid and put our activities on hold for a while. I think we all feel a little better now that we have started to engage in our projects again. I know I do. I realize how important the work is that we do together, not only because it

improves the lives of those we serve, but it improves our lives as well. We feel good about ourselves and our participation in working towards change – in practicing hope.

Amanda Gorman in her inaugural poem writes about our growth during this difficult time of the pandemic, racial violence, and division in this country. She writes:

We lay down our arms
So that we can reach our arms out to one another.
We seek harm to none, and harmony for all.

Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true;
That even as we grieved, we grew,
That even as we hurt, we hoped,
That even as we tired, we tried.
That we'll forever be tied together. Victorious.³

This poem speaks to me in the way Amanda claims that through our struggles, we grew, hoped and tried, and we did this together. Our hands may have paused during this time of covid, but not our hearts, not our creative spirits, not our hopes and dreams. In the letter to the Ephesians, the writer prays that God may give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation so **with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which he has called us.** Through this hard time of covid, war, and political strife, let us strive forward practicing hope together through the eyes of our hearts. Amen.

³ Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, Penguin Random House, NY, 2021, p18.