

HOPE BURNING

We lit the candle of hope in church this past Sunday as we celebrated the beginning of the season of Advent. While it is nice to see a candle burning to remind us how hope can be found in the Lord regardless of the circumstance, stories can provide us with an even more powerful reminder of this truth.

One of my basketball players shared with Nadine last week how she was impacted by seeing hope displayed recently. This particular player had tried out for many different teams before coming to one of our practices. I have shared with you in previous messages this fall how challenging it has been to find players to form a team because so many decided not to return to the court this year.

At one tryout this player attended the coach was very pessimistic about the chances of forming a team. This coach did not leave her with very much hope at the end of the tryout. She then attended our tryout. I was honest with my players at that tryout that we did not have enough players to form a team yet, but that I would keep trying and not give up. She shared how it was seeing this hope and optimism displayed on my part that made all the difference in her wanting to accept a position on our team.

When she joined our team, we still had to fill 2-3 more positions before we had enough players. One parent commented how hard I worked to find those other players. It was not hard work on my part that made the difference but rather **maintaining hope and keeping it on display** for the players and parents to see. **God was the one doing all the hard work** of finding the other players we needed.

Last week I not only heard this story from my player who was touched by hope, but also discovered the other coach who had shown pessimism was not able to put a team together. My heart breaks for the coach and the girls of that other team. I have a heart filled with thankfulness though that hope made all the difference and it is one lesson I will be able to pass along to my players this year.

This player's story reminded me how we can offer people the gift of hope as we go through difficult circumstances together. As Christians our hope

is found in our belief in God through Jesus Christ that nothing is impossible for Him since He is in complete control. Difficult circumstances are an opportunity for us and others to see that we truly do have hope in God to work in these situations to make something good happen. This player obviously saw the hope that came from inside my heart.

A question that would be interesting for us to consider is whether people are seeing hope expressed by us in our words and actions as we go through difficult circumstances. Would people see hope burning strong and brightly in us just like it was seen in the candle of hope this past Sunday in church? Would they see instead a flame almost extinguished of hope and about to go out? **Because hope is such an important gift that we can give to ourselves and to others, it is important for us to be able to keep this flame lit and glowing in us regardless of the circumstances we are facing.** The key to keeping this hope on display is **focusing on God and His character** rather than our circumstances.

This is what the apostle Paul came to understand as he faced difficult circumstances in his life. In **2 Corinthians 4** Paul shares some of the trials and sufferings he encounters while preaching the Good News. He wants the early Christians to understand the importance of never losing hope or quitting when they go through tough circumstances. He conveys the secret to maintaining hope by saying:

That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So, we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen.

(2 Corinthians 4: 16-18)

Paul shares here that the reason he did not lose hope through his struggles is **that he chose to concentrate on the inner strength provided by the Holy Spirit present in his heart.** By constantly renewing his hope with the help of the Holy Spirit, Paul is able to realize his present troubles are small and will not last very long. He also shares how he maintains hope by **focusing on**

what God is doing, things that cannot always be seen, instead of on his troubles which he can see.

It is this point that made the difference between my approach to having a lack of players and the other coach's attitude. Faced with the exact same circumstance the other coach chose to focus on the negative, while I kept my gaze on hope because of my faith in God. Maintaining hope made all the difference in the end. I could not see everything God was doing behind the scenes, but He definitely was at work adding to the number of players we needed. By my player sharing this story I was reminded how **my hope is well placed in Him**, and the **importance of being a beacon of it for others**.

The gift of hope we have in our belief in God through Jesus Christ is on display in the first candle of Advent. I pray that hope is burning brightly and warmly in all of our hearts right now so others will be able to see and recognize it in us. Hope is a gift others need as well. If life's trials are causing hope to begin to dwindle in us, let's look to Christ's Spirit to get it going stronger and brighter again. By so doing, maybe we too will have a story to share about somebody seeing hope displayed in us.

Keep Safe and God Bless

Pastor Dean