

With this Sunday we are entering the season of Advent in the Christian liturgical calendar. For Christians, for some of you here, it is a season of anticipation of the message of hope for a different world preached by Jesus 2000 years ago. For others of us, this is a secular season of family and friends and sometimes forced conviviality. For many of us it is a season of incredible busyness and obligation, something that David Strohmeier and Susan Scott are addressing in their Sunday morning discussion group this month. Whatever this season is to us, we might all benefit by reflecting on the meaning of hope in this month of increasing darkness and continued disturbing news on many fronts.

Some, perhaps many, of you are familiar with Dr. Cornell West. Dr. West is an African American man educated at Harvard and Princeton. He is a social critic and calls himself a radical democrat socialist.ⁱ In 1994, Dr. West was a featured speaker at our Unitarian Universalist national gathering, known as General Assembly. GA for short.

What follows is an extended excerpt of a sermon, inspired by Dr. West and written by retired UU minister and professor, Rev. Dr. David Bumbaugh. His sermon was titled "Prisoner of Hope."ⁱⁱ

At the conclusion of his eloquent and passionate presentation, Dr. West indicated that he was willing to entertain questions and comments from the audience. The audience, being composed of Unitarian Universalists, was eager to engage the speaker in dialogue. As often is the case, much of the conversation took the form of personal testimony, affirming the concerns of the speaker and reinforcing the points he had made. One member of the audience, however, asked Dr. West, in light of his experience, was he

optimistic about the future. Did he believe that there was any way in which we might overcome the terrible legacy of our history?

Dr. West paused for a moment. Then, with sadness in his voice, he said, “No. I am not optimistic about the future.” He went on to talk about conditions of our cities; the daily destruction of the lives of black people; the unwillingness of our society to do what needs to be done; the role of the media, relentlessly portraying black culture in terms of violence and irresponsibility and confessed that he could not find in the contemporary world any reason for optimism. “However,” he went on after a brief pause, “while I am not an optimist, I remain a prisoner of hope. The two are not the same thing.”

In many ways, that last statement was one of the most important comments I heard at the General Assembly, [says Bumbaugh], for it has profound implications not only for how we respond to racism, but for how we address complex problems of all kinds, and it offers an imperative for a moral life at almost every level. Dr. West, in suggesting that there is a distinction to be made between optimism and hope, offered a creative perspective on a world which stubbornly refuses to incarnate our dreams or to satisfy our expectations or to realize our ambitions.

Optimism, says [Bumbaugh's] dictionary, is the doctrine that everything is ordered for the best. Most of the time, [he says] I find optimism a difficult doctrine to embrace with eyes open. We live in a world awash in resources, but a world in which, nevertheless, millions are homeless and hungry and ill-clad, a world in which random violence is the daily experience of millions more, a world in which baseless prejudices and ancient hatreds inflict needless suffering and death on young and old alike, a world structured in such a way that whole generations and entire classes of

human beings are treated as expendable, a world in which the poor see no future and the rich find little satisfaction, a world in which those who have nothing fear that future will be no better, while those who have everything live in constant fear the loss of what they have. In such a world, it is difficult to embrace an optimistic vision, to believe that somehow everything is ordered for the best.

And yet, [says Bumbaugh] that is the broken, shattered, fragmented world in which we live our lives and that is the bleeding, suffering world in which we are called to structure a moral existence. To see the world clearly is to be tempted to dumb resignation and despair. Yet, if we yield to that temptation, we become complicit in all the horrors which surround us. The great challenge is to see the world for what it is and yet not succumb to helplessness and resignation, to understand that there may be no evidence that anything we do or say or think will make much difference and yet refuse to close our eyes, refuse to censor our thoughts, refuse to silence our tongues.

Dr. West suggested that the alternative to simple optimism, or desperate resignation is hope. Hope, according to my dictionary [continues Bumbaugh], involves living in a spirit of expectation. To be a prisoner of hope, in Dr. West's words, is to be captured by a very special kind of expectation. The expectation which captures us is not that everything will work out for the best; not that our dreams will be realized and our ideals accomplished; not that the world will become what we want it to be. Rather, to be a prisoner of hope is to know that the world is neither defined by our fears nor limited by our dreams. To be a prisoner of hope is to be enthralled by the conviction that there is more at work in the world than we can know or understand, that the world is complex beyond our ability to orchestrate it

or manage it. To be a prisoner of hope is to be caught up in the expectation that somehow, in ways we cannot imagine or anticipate, out of the deep and unformed resources of existence may arise, at any moment, people and circumstances with the strength to transform us and the world, our dreams and our fears in ways we cannot anticipate. To be a prisoner of hope is to understand that there exists in the world a power we do not control and do not fully understand, which, at any moment may redeem our history, moving it in different and unexpected directions. To be a prisoner of hope is to live with a fundamental trust in the underlying nature of reality and its ability to confound our worst fears and our most cherished dreams, producing a world richer and more challenging than anything we could have planned or envisioned. And above all, to be a prisoner of hope is to hold oneself open, ready to respond affirmatively when the new possibility erupts among us.

[Bumbaugh continues] ...to be a prisoner of hope [is] to see the world as it is, clearly and without romantic illusions; to feel its pain and its injustice and its inequity; to understand fully the distance between what is and what ought to be; and to give oneself to the work of narrowing that distance, not because we know what needs to be done, and not because we have assurance that it will make a difference, and not because we will reap the rewards of our efforts, but because, by enlisting ourselves in the work of the world, we open up the possibilities of unexplored avenues, unanticipated alternatives, unexpected opportunities out of which some new thing may emerge. To be a prisoner of hope is to seek to ally oneself with the forces of renewal in world where logic and reason suggest renewal is an impossible dream.

And that, my friends, is what religion at its heart is all about, concludes Bumbaugh--evoking and encouraging and sustaining people who are determined to live as prisoners of hope.

I, my words now, found this a compelling message, not just for me but for our church. We have been conversing about our future. What is our vision of hope for this church and for how we interact with the world? We cannot know what the future holds. But we can trust, we can have faith, that things are complex beyond our knowing and that our actions now can have untold consequences for the future. In this spirit of hope let us enter the season of Advent, of Christmas, of the holidays.

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornel_West

ⁱⁱ Touchstones Worship Resource Packet, December, 2017.