



Roanoke, Virginia

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## *“Witness of Hope”*

Invest in Hope Sermon Series Part V

*Romans 8:24-25, Matthew 13:24-30*

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In the first sermon of our sermon series, *Invest in Hope*, Elizabeth spoke to the saving grace of Christ, the central hope of our faith. In spite of the worst we can do, God loves us; and beyond what we can do for ourselves, God saves us. Paul says this about hope beyond what we can see, imagine, or accomplish on our own.

Romans 8:24-25

For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

We wait for hope and look for it. We look for signs of God’s saving grace to justify the hope of which Paul speaks. In our passage from Matthew, Jesus speaks to those times when we look at a person, an institution, or the world and our spirits sag rather than lift. Jesus spoke to these despondent moments with a parable.

Matthew 13:24-30

<sup>24</sup> “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field, <sup>25</sup> but while everybody was asleep an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. <sup>26</sup> So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. <sup>27</sup> And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘**Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?**’ <sup>28</sup> He answered, ‘**An enemy has done this.**’ The slaves said to him, ‘**Then do you want us to go and gather**



them?’<sup>29</sup> But he replied, ‘No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.’<sup>30</sup> Let both of them grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

America loves heroes. The box office proves that. We pay good money to see

- the cowboy ride into town even though he knows he is outnumbered,
- the lawman refusing to give up when no one else cares about the case,
- the vigilante taking matters into her own hands,
- the man swooping down wearing tights and a cape,
  - or wielding a hammer,
  - or shooting webs out his wrist,
  - or a billionaire wearing a suit of armor somehow fighting with a gymnast’s agility.

If necessary, these heroes break rules and defy authorities to get done what needs to be done. Yes, America loves heroes. They inspire hope.

But for America to have real hope, we don’t normally need heroes to come to the rescue. We need institutions to come to the rescue. That is such a typical thing for a Presbyterian pastor to say. We have this irritating habit of saying what we think is true even when it is boring. For America to have real hope, we don’t normally need heroes to come to the rescue, but institutions to come to the rescue.

Maybe I can jazz what I am saying up with a family story.

Many of you know that my parents were trapped for a week in their Montreat, NC home without power or water. I didn’t tell most of you about Robert who is my sister, Jane’s, widower. He lives in Black Mountain which sits right next to Montreat. With Hurricane Helene on its way, Robert went up the mountain to be with Penny, a friend. At least, that was our assumption because we had not heard from Robert for a week. We couldn’t be sure, though, because Penny’s neighborhood was completely cut off by water, debris and a mudslide; and phone and cell service were lost.

I won’t hold you in suspense: Robert and Penny were eventually located and evacuated. But my story comes from the time when we had not heard from him.

My brother, Mark, who was staying with my parents, decided that enough was enough and come hell or high water he was going to make his way to the top of that neighborhood even if it meant crawling, climbing, chopping, wadding, swimming and digging to get there. He’s a tough and resourceful guy, so he’s the guy to try. So, Mark dressed and equipped himself for the mission and set out. He came to a great barrier where the bridge was washed out, the road was gone, and the way up completely blocked. It was easy to see why no one had yet made it through because there was a great barrier of trees, logs, rocks and a huge mud pit that looked like it could swallow him whole. He studied what he would do; what he had to get around, what he had to chop or move, go around, climb over, wade through—And then, to his shock, he saw on the other side—a family watching him... *a family of bears.*



Come hell or high water, maybe, but come bears? No! Mark turned around and hiked back to my parents' home. A couple of days later, a large community of organized workers with heavy machinery was able to do what Mark could not do on his own.

Natural disasters remind us of what is always true. Most times, there is more reason to hope in institutions than individuals. Within a couple of weeks, we have had two hurricanes hit Florida. I am sure there have been individuals who, on their own, did what needed to be done;

- pull someone from the water;
- rescue someone by boat,
- provide shelter, water, food to someone who lost it all.

But, for the vast majority of those impacted by the hurricanes their greatest hope is in the organized and well-funded response of government and non-profits. Institutions will provide the many millions of dollars and thousands of workers needed to bring immediate relief and then infrastructure and services needed to make it possible for normal life to resume: power, water and cell service restored; businesses open; schools in session. Indifferent or disdainful as many are toward institutions, it will be through institutions that lives will be restored.

That shouldn't be surprising because an institution is nothing more than a community that has organized itself to achieve goals. And that means that what is true about communities and the people in them is true also of institutions. Some are largely wheat that help the world. Some are largely weeds that hurt the world. There is a huge difference between the Red Cross and the Mafia. And it is true that within institutions there is both wheat and weeds. Which makes it all the more important for those who want to serve the causes of our better angels to organize and consolidate their efforts because

- those who are self-serving,
  - or seeking power for power's sake,
  - or pursuing destructive ends thinking they are pursuing the good,
- are doing a lot of organizing and consolidating themselves.

So, abandoning institutions or tearing them down because there are weeds among the wheat isn't hopeful behavior. Trying to be the hero is noble but usually not what the world needs of us. What is hopeful is what is helpful. What is helpful is to join with others in serving the cause of what is good, decent, and right.

That's true of many kinds of communities and institutions—community, government, non-profit and even for-profit. But we are in church today, so I want to talk about the church. Let's remember who Jesus first named as head of his church. It was Peter, the one of whom Jesus said was a rock on which he would build his church. He was *also* the one who wanted so badly to be a hero. He was the one who, chest out and eyes burning, said he didn't care what others would do, he would never deny Jesus. And when an organized party came to arrest Jesus, he was the one who took matters in his own hands and attacked one of them (a slave by the way, probably not the best armed of the group).



We all know that he ended up denying he knew Jesus and running away. It was only after he failed as a hero that he realized that Jesus didn't need him to be a hero in the first place. Jesus needed him to feed his sheep. Jesus needed Peter to organize and lead a community who would carry on the work Jesus did and bear witness to the love and goodness of God. He wanted his followers to be a light in the world bearing hope that, despite everything, God was working salvation in the world. He wanted Peter to lead followers to be wheat among weeds.

Wheat among weeds is what Jesus wants Second Presbyterian Church is to be. The temptation for a church is to think it is called to be the hero, to be the savior of the world, to rid the world of all its isms and sins, to show disgust at any evidence of sin in the world and to feel deep shame for any evidence of weeds among us.

But that is not our calling. God is the world's savior. We have weeds among our wheat and only by God's grace are we saved ourselves. Our calling is to bear witness to the hope that God's grace is real and shows itself when we

- resist what is unjust,
- work to mend what is broken,
- and heal what is hurt—

when we show evidence that lives can be lived with purpose, meaning and joy.

I believe our congregation over its years, and despite those pesky weeds, has answered that call. I offer three areas as examples:

- care of children and youth,
- care of adults,
- and care of the world.

Children:

We live in a culture where children and youth are over-stressed even while over-protected. Must of the stress is necessary, of course. To live and to grow is to be stressed. Children need to learn. They need to try things and push themselves to be good at them to find out who they are and what they are capable of. Whether it is soccer, or dance, or simply being an influencer among friends, they are going to succeed or fail according to some kind of measure.

But what children need to hear more than anything else is that God's love of them is beyond measure and they have inherent value. Good parenting helps them know this, but most children will outlive their parents. They need community. A healthy church is a community defined by God's grace and lets children not only hear but experience the truth of what is proclaimed at infant baptism; that they are beloved children of God.

So, we organize and gather resources to be that community for children through our programs, we provide a place where children are accepted, even as they learn and grow through our Sunday schools, Bible Schools, and fellowship opportunities—even as they are provided times to serve others and times to get away to reflect on their relationship with God.



Adults:

When Jesus told his parable of the wheat and the weeds, he was speaking to adults not children. He was speaking to grown-adult-anxiety over the evidence of weeds in the world. He was speaking of the temptation to either abandon the field or burn it all down.

What the church can provide adults more than anything else is Sabbath reflection; retreat, escape, pause.

- What our worship services, our adult education and fellowship opportunities represent
- what our prayer and care for each other represent—

is the building of a community of light that can then shine in the world.

The most important truth about who we are is heard in worship and practiced in common life together. The most important truth is that we are saved by the grace of a God who loves us unconditionally. Before our faith becomes about how we live, it is first about how God lives among us. And when adults are too old or so sick to “do any good” seems gone, the church is there to show them that the truth of baptism remains; they have inherent value because they are loved unconditionally.

## The World

It is on the basis of God’s love for us that we become a light of hope that the weeds will not choke out the wheat in the world. Despite campaign promises,

- we know that there are no heroes who will save us if only we elect them.
- We know that the problems of history will never be finally solved until history itself ends.
- We know that those who join together in pursuit of greed, or power for power’s sake are active.

We can’t eliminate the weeds.

But, we can grow and protect the wheat so the world can be fed anyway! For many reasons that go back decades—reasons that have to do with the grace of God and the good intent of those who have gone before—we at Second Presbyterian Church have organized ourselves to be that institution of hope in the world. If you are active here, you can’t miss it. You hear the Minutes for Mission and the Calls for Discipleship. You have read the Pastors’ Letters and Second Sheet articles. Through what you have heard and what you have read, you have received an education in real issues and needs here in the Roanoke region, in the larger church, and the world—particularly San Juan de la Maguana. It is an education in weeds and needs.

It is also an *education in hope* because we have heard and read story after story of how the efforts, we are so heavily involved in that make a positive difference in this neighborhood, in the southeast community, in the larger church and in world.

We are a community that, despite the bears, is throwing its weight behind getting logs moved and mud cleared, so stranded neighbors can be reached.



This is Commitment Sunday. We are encouraging members and others who support our congregation to make a pledge to the life and witness of the church. Yes, your pledge will support the budget of an institution. But let's remember that each line item of that budget is about building a community grounded in the love of God and showing God's love to the world. Supporting the budget is one good way to invest in hope. It is to promote the wheat over the weeds so that a witness can be made to what Elizabeth said is most important: God's unconditional love and saving grace.

