



FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE (Sermon)

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Introduction

Friends of Hope is a good topic for this special day. Friendship (love) and hope are intertwined in many ways. And as love and hope form important parts of life so does the spiritual dimension. Paul, the first century Christian missionary and writer of many of the letters of the Bible, brought these three concepts together when he wrote the Church in Corinth, “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13 NKJV).

The concepts of love (friendship) and hope form a significant thread in the 1997 New York Times # 1 Non-Fiction Best Seller, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. In the book, later made into a movie, newspaper sports columnist Mitch Albom recounts the time spent with his 78-year-old sociology professor, Morrie Schwartz, at Brandeis University, who was dying from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

Mitch, a former student of Schwartz, had not corresponded with him since attending his college classes 16 years earlier. During those 16 years, he had become a successful sports columnist with the *Detroit Free Press* and was living an over-paced life that was putting significant strain on his personal relationships. Mitch chanced upon a *Nightline* television interview with the professor who recounted his hope that the journey with his debilitating and ultimately fatal illness would provide an opportunity for Morrie to leave insights for others into how to die well.

As an aside, Morrie planned a funeral service while he was still alive and invited his family and friends to come together and remember his life and give thanks for the relationships that had bound family and friends together. Love was expressed, thanks were given, and memories relived so that there would be no regretful “I wish I had . . .” This is a very special idea.

Mitch made contact with his former professor and arranged a visit. A newspaper strike at the time freed Mitch for the two-and-a-half-hour weekly commute from Michigan to Massachusetts to visit with Schwartz on Tuesdays. Morrie continued to be his professor as they discussed acceptance, communication, love, values, openness, and happiness on these 14 Tuesday visits. The name Morrie derives its meaning, “my teacher,” from Hebrew (מורי *mori*).

The first century Paul writes of faith, hope, and love.

The late twentieth century Morrie Schwartz also insists:

- “Love each other or perish.”
- “Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live.”
- “Forgive yourself before you die. Then forgive others.”
- “Love is the only rational act.”
- “Be compassionate. And take responsibility for each other. If we only learned those lessons, this world would be so much better a place.”
- “So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they’re busy doing things they think are important. This is because they’re chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.”

Hopelessness and Helplessness

Like Morrie at the end of the twentieth century, the first century Paul saw a similar challenge for people to live a fulfilled and meaningful life. People aspired to something better for a positive future just as Morrie did, but they were helpless to do anything about it. Paul personally experienced this same sense of helplessness. “But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God – through Jesus Christ Our Lord” (Romans 7:23-25, NKJV)! Do you find yourself in a similar situation? Hoping for a better and more fulfilling life and not finding it? At times most of us can identify with Paul’s struggle.

[You should choose your own illustrations that would be more appropriate for your situation for the next three paragraphs.]

A January 2017 television news report told the story of the helpless plight of a Syrian refugee, Ahmed, stuck in a tent in the snow in a UNHCR camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. He was waiting impatiently to be processed and granted refugee status. His situation is hopeless for as he waits he could freeze to death. Even if he survives and is allowed to stay, it could be years before he is settled in another country. Many others have drowned at sea trying to seek refuge from their war-torn countries. Others, with no means of escape, have been killed in conflict or have seen family and friends die before their eyes.

Commentators have reflected on the political uncertainty in the Western democracies during 2016. They are suggesting that voters with a sense of helplessness have lost confidence in their politicians to provide answers and are looking to new candidates and new solutions to address the issues. They are hopefully looking for solutions for issues about which they feel helpless to control themselves.

I experienced this sense of helplessness some years ago with my daughter. Haylee had left home, studied at college and was looking for work. We had some challenging times with her during the teenage years but had weathered these okay, we thought. But now she was struggling with some not nice things that had happened in her past. We were living on another continent in a developing country with limited internet and did not have easy access to be in contact with her and only annual visits home. She was holding us as parents

responsible for not doing more. Hope of keeping connected with Haylee was fading as we felt an intense feeling of helplessness.

Paul describes the hopeless condition of the people in Ephesus before they came to know Jesus as their friend and savior. “that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants or promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).

Hope and Faith

But God had something better in His thoughts for them and for us than to live lives of hopelessness and helpless desperation.

Let me illustrate. God had chosen Abraham and his descendants to be the means of showing His goodness to the world. But both Abraham and his descendants had mixed success in connecting with God and living out God’s goodness before the world. In fact after a time, they had moved so far away from living God’s purposes and plans that God allowed the nation of Babylon to invade Israel and take prisoners captive. While they were in this helpless situation in Babylon, learning the lessons that God wanted to teach them, He reminded them “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11, NKJV).

God gave another illustration which makes perfect sense if you live in or have travelled to an arid region of the world. His illustration is meaningless if you live in a high rainfall area where everything is lush and green continually. God pictured this future filled with hope and certainty. “For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; but its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit” (Jeremiah 17:8, NKJV).

This is the picture of the secure future God has in mind for you and me, and it comes to be a reality through faith in Jesus.

Notice how Paul expresses this faith future. “and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Ephesian 2:6-8, NKJV).

So we see how faith awakens hope for God’s plan for a future that is full of hope.

But how does faith develop?

Twelve years after *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom published *Have a Little Faith* which became another #1 best seller. It is an interesting look at the lives of three people as they intersect – Albert L. Lewis, Mitch’s rabbi from his New Jersey home town, Henry Covington, a former New York street kid and drug dealer who became the pastor of a church in Detroit of largely homeless men and women and is similar in age to Mitch, and Mitch himself. During a visit home, the rabbi (Reb) asked Mitch to do the eulogy for his funeral. Mitch was shocked because apart from the occasional visit back to New Jersey for Jewish special days, he had had little contact with Reb. A series of visits to hear the story of Reb’s life and service

in the synagogue and a developing relationship with the Reb led Mitch on a journey of re-awakening faith.

At a similar time, Mitch came into contact with Pastor Henry Covington. The church in New York that sponsored the ministry at the Am I My Brother's Keeper Church, which had fallen on hard times, and Pastor Henry struggled to keep the ministry for the homeless men and women going. He and his wife had people staying in their home at times to care for them. The church was derelict with broken stained glass windows and a leaking roof and the attendees were questionable. Who could trust a New York street kid who had been a drug dealer – an ex-criminal? This was the question that Mitch asked himself as he became aware of the financial needs of the ministry. Over a period of months, Mitch visited the pastor, and as their relationship developed, Mitch discovered he could “have a little faith” in others and develop faith himself.

In a similar way, as we develop a relationship with God, as we get to know what Jesus is really like, faith develops in our hearts and the promised future full of hope becomes ours. How do you get to know what God is like? Read the stories of His life that were written by His friends and followers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It is sometimes helpful to read the stories and discuss the principles with others in someone's home or at a café. You can also get a personal introduction to Jesus from someone who already knows Him – perhaps the friend who invited you today. As you get to know Him, you will find love at the heart of your relationship with Him.

Hope and Love

God's love (or as Paul expresses it here as ‘how truly good and kind He is to us’) is the foundation of all His interactions with you and me.

Some people have come to a false conclusion that the Bible is a rule book, rather than stories of God's relationship with individuals, families, and nations. Alas, even some Christians live their lives as if the Bible was God's rule book to follow, but this is not the way it is with God. As Morrie knew, and as Mitch began to learn, “love each other or perish.” And God loved. In fact, “. . . God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16).

Paul paints this amazing picture of this love of God. “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),” (Ephesians 2:4-5, NKJV). The amazing thing about a relationship with God is that He took the first steps in making a relationship possible. Long before we thought about Him, He was thinking about us.

When I tell you a little more about Henry Covington, you will better understand how God takes the first steps and perseveres through the challenges of our relationships with Him.

Here is Henry's story of his life. “Born and raised on the streets of New York, I—Henry Covington, formerly known as ‘Bo’—grew up in the mean streets of the ghetto. Exposed to many of the harsh realities associated with urban life, I became a product of my environment. By age 9 I had graduated from drinking beer, wine, and liquor to snorting heroin. By age 16, car thefts, burglaries, and armed robberies had become routine. Before age 30, I spent 3½

years in state prison (for a crime I didn't commit). I came out and became a notorious drug dealer, only to wind up a hopeless abuser of crack, heroin, and alcohol.”

But God had a future of hope for Henry. Henry continues his story. “On Easter Sunday of 1987, the Lord showed His mercy on me by delivering me from this path that I was so recklessly pursuing—a path that was leading to my own destruction.” A friendship with Jesus developed, and Pastor Henry moved to Detroit and established the Am I My Brother’s Keeper Ministry.

Paul describes how this relationship with God – no, this relationship that was initiated by God – works. “. . .in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2: 7-10, NKJV).

Conclusion

So Paul was right when he said, “For now there are faith, hope, and love. But of these three, the greatest is love.” And we can also agree with Morrie to “love each other or perish.”

Where are you today on the continuum between faith and faithlessness, between hope and hopelessness, and between love and indifference? Are you closer to faith, hope, and love than faithlessness, hopelessness, and indifference? Are you where you want to be?

The good news is that you do not need to stay where you are. You can take the first step toward God because He has already taken all the steps toward you. And you have here a group of Friends of Hope who will journey with you. So . . . enjoy a journey full of faith, hope, and love.