

Devotions – July 5-11, 2020
By Bishop Emeritus Thomas A. Skrenes

Seven Layers of Hope-Seven Days with the Spirit

Sunday July 5, 2020

First Layer of Hope: FREEDOM

Text: Galatians 5:13

“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather, serve one another humbly in love.”

I need hope! I am writing these devotions in late May in the midst of the 2020 “quarantine” for Coronavirus. I am “hoping” that as these seven days of devotions are published, the world makes more sense than it does as I put pen to paper today. With anxiety abounding, with illness and discouragement all around and with the concern for employment and economic security for my family and neighbors, I am in need of hope. But from where is hope to come? In what or whom are we to trust and to hope in?

I am a student of history. I find the life and history of the Christian Church to be absolutely powerful. It is a sign of God’s presence in our midst. In their book “A History of the Finnish Church,” Markku Heikkika and Simo Heininen remind us that the Spirit of God has worked through the Church of Jesus Christ in both times of prosperity and disaster providing the people of God with hope. And what is true in Finland is also the worldwide truth of the Church’s existence wherever the Cross is lifted.

While this Coronavirus disaster is new to us, the devastation of plagues is not new to the Christian Church. A hundred plagues in the last thousand years have killed millions and terrified millions more. Yet the church of Jesus has not given in or been destroyed. The Church has not survived because of its own cleverness or luck. The Church has been able to find hope in the midst of disaster. And that hope is based on freedom in Christ Jesus. We are free in Christ to live our lives in hope, in the quiet confidence that all of us are held in the arms of a loving God forever.

We are free. And armed with that freedom we can face every day serving our neighbor.

Let us pray: *Giver of Freedom, surround us with your Holy Spirit. Giver of Freedom, praise to you for allowing us to live in you so that facing the realities of the world we might be of service to our neighbor and in that serving, proclaim the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the Risen Lord Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*



Monday July 6, 2020

Second Layer of Hope: LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

Text: Galatians 5:14

“For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

When I was a parish pastor I would often begin my conversation with a couple who were planning to get married with this question, “Why do you want to get married and you cannot use the word ‘love’ in the answer!” They would stumble around looking for an answer but get eventually to the place where I wanted them to be. They would learn that marriage and love is all about the willingness to sacrifice for the other. To love someone means that you are willing to serve.

Not just an emotional feeling, love is the willingness to sacrifice for the other. Thus, loving our spouse, our country or the Church of Jesus means that we are willing to sacrifice.

St. Paul invites us in Galatians 5 to love our neighbor as ourselves. How do you love yourself? Taking a daily walk, watching your diet, spending time with your hobbies may all be a part of loving oneself. Our hope is not built on loving ourselves but loving, sacrificing for our neighbors, those around us. Some of our neighbors may be thousands of miles away or they may be just down the street. Some of our neighbors speak English and some do not. Some may be a different race or religion or may think very differently than we do about politics or social issues. Yet they are by Biblical definition a neighbor.

When was the last time you sacrificed for your neighbor? In my time as a pastor in both congregations and in the life of our synod, I have seen many of God’s people be absolutely sacrificial and generous. It is a beautiful thing to see God’s people care for and attend to each other. And by serving and sacrificing for others, we are living in hope. It is a very good place to dwell.

Let us pray: O God, you have placed neighbors all around us. You have allowed us the opportunity to serve them. Inspire each and every one of us to learn what love is by helping and encouraging and building up our neighbors. You, O God are the giver of hope. May we be that hope for others and may you in Christ be the hope of the entire world. In the name of the one who sacrificed everything for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Tuesday July 7, 2020

Third Layer of Hope: LED BY THE SPIRIT

Text: Galatians 5:18

“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

In his commentary to Galatians, Martin Luther gives us some great advice. Luther honestly admits that he has been “assailed by many violent passions, but as soon as I took hold of some Scripture passage, my temptations left me. Without the Word I could not have helped myself against the flesh.” Luther is calling us to embrace the Word of God. He is saying fall in love with God’s Word and you will find hope and comfort. Do not be led by the world, he says, but by the Holy Spirit.

In seminary, a million years ago, we learned that every verse of Scripture text is either “law or Gospel.” Another way to say it is that the Words of God recorded for us in the Bible either are condemning to us or they are freeing to us. I mention this theological point to remind you that in the Scriptures we have God’s expectation (the law) but also the hope of the Spirit’s leadership and comfort (the Gospel). The Spirit of God will always point us to Christ himself! And Jesus is the good news we must live within.

How do you embrace the Word of God? How do you surround yourself with hope? Now it is my turn to make a “true confession.” I am a news junkie. I read many newspapers online every day. I watch Fox News and CNN and MSNBC and PBS and BBC on the tube. And during this Coronavirus Spring, without baseball on television, I have been watching more news and more political commentary and all that chatter does not give me much reason to hope. The news we see and read is largely bad, but like driving past a car accident, we cannot take our eyes off it. The talking heads and profound pronouncements of the “great men and women” in our culture do not give me much reason to hope.

The challenge for me and for all of us is to be led by the Spirit. How do I lean into God’s Spirit except by reminding myself of God’s promises? Can we find time for what matters? I am praying with you today that we all might find ourselves in the Word of God. The Spirit is leading us into the Word. Will we follow God?

Let us pray: *Come Holy Spirit into our lives. You provide us with the gift of hope. Teach us to live in the Word. Help us center ourselves this day in the Scriptures. Even if we have to*

dust off our Bible, give us the inspiration to focus on your Word and grow in faith each and every day. Teach us to live as people of the book and people given the great gift of hope in Jesus Christ. Amen.



Wednesday July 8, 2020

Fourth Layer of Hope: TRUTH

Text: Galatians 5:19-21

“The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

St. Paul is doing battle big time in this text with immorality. He is telling the truth that some very distressing and painful sins are being committed by Christian people. He is not mincing words. “Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” And so fits of rage and discord and ambition and drunkenness, orgies, factions and the like are being denounced. We would prefer not to talk about all of this in polite conversation. It makes us squirm as we see sin in our own lives detailed.

The truth is often painful. About ten years ago I flew to San Antonio to preside at a wedding of a good friend of mine. I have known Jason for twenty years and he and his fiancé were to be married on the River Walk the next day. He picked me up at the airport and very quickly, as we were talking and not paying much attention to the streets became lost. Driving along an unfamiliar residential street it was obvious we were going the wrong way. I said to Jason, “Just pull into a driveway and turn around.” Jason looked at me like I was the man in the moon and said, “Me, turn around here, an African-American man turning around in some white guy’s driveway in the whitest part of town. Are you kidding? I and you might be killed.” I restrained myself from saying, “No, that won’t happen.” Jason’s reality is that every day he has to drive while “being black.” His experiences are not mine. I might want to pretend that racism and the violence that often surrounds it is not real. I might want to minimize it but racism is very real and very personal for him. The good news that weekend was that we found our way from being lost in traffic and that the happy couple was beautifully married.

St. Paul tells the truth and it must be faced. We have all the tools we need to destroy ourselves and we are doing it by our own actions. The hope for us is that Jesus Christ loves us even when we are evil and stupid. This hope endures even as our sins threaten to overwhelm us.

Let us pray: *You alone O God can save us. Save us, we pray from ourselves. Save us, O God from what we do and what we do not do. Flood our lives with your grace so even as we live in the midst of the troubles and evil of this life we might rise to a new day in you. From our sins, God save us. From our fears deliver us and bring us to serve you in the name of Jesus our Lord and hope giver. Amen.*



Thursday July 9, 2020

Fifth Layer of Hope: FRUITS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Text: Galatians 5:22-23

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

My grandparents had a pear tree in their orchard on the farm. As a boy, when it was towards the end of summer, I would find opportunity to visit the orchard. Now the apples were good tasting, but it was the pears that attracted my attention. As a seven or eight-year old, I loved to look for the ripe pears on the trees. The best pears on those trees were dark yellow, almost brown in color. I can still remember grabbing them off the branches and tasting their sweetness.

When I visualize the “fruits of the spirit,” I see those beautiful pears hanging from the orchard trees. One of the “fruits” Paul says is love, another is joy and another one is peace. And there is forbearance, kindness, goodness and faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All are sweet and tasty. In Psalm 34 we read something very similar. The Psalmist says, “Taste and see the Lord is good. Happy are those who trust in Him.”

I have pondered this text from St. Paul for years. During my entire term as bishop I had the words of Galatians 5:22 under the desk top glass in my office. During both difficult days and great days, I looked at this verse to remind me of the promises of God. As I type this devotion this morning the word that pops out at me from the Galatians list of gifts of the

Spirit is “forbearance.” Some versions of the text use the words “long suffering” as a translation of “forbearance.”

Spiritual forbearance is a willingness not to judge too early, a desire to allow people to grow without negative criticism even as they make mistakes, to put up with actions and words that are less than positive or helpful. All of this “forbearance” is in a desire to help others live into their baptismal gifts. And some days these gifts taste like a sweet ripe pear plucked from grandpa’s orchard.

Let us pray: Come Holy Spirit, God and Lord and make your gifts plentiful to each believer’s life and heart. Come Holy Spirit into this good day which you have blessed me with. May your gifts of joy and love enlighten my life and illumine the world. Come Holy Spirit, renew us with all your gifts so that we can serve your people throughout the world and praise you and the one who died for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Friday July 10, 2020

Sixth Layer of Hope: THE CRUCIFIED GOD

Text: Galatians 5:24

“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

How many sermons I have preached in my forty-year career as a pastor! I wonder how many sermons I have heard sitting under many a pulpit in my sixty-five years of life. After all these years, I am still trying to figure out how to preach, to make the Word of God come alive in the hearts and minds of God’s people.

My preaching professor at seminary, Dr. Paul Harms was known to say, “The biggest challenge of a preacher is not to translate Greek and Hebrew into English but instead to translate English into English!” In other words, preachers are called to make sense out of “churchy” words and make the Scriptures fresh and powerful to each new generation of God’s people. The eyes soon glaze over and the mind is numbed quickly if we keep hearing words like “justification, sanctification, and crucifixion” and a whole group of other big syllable words and phrases over and over again in the sermon without tying these words to life in the here and now—in the summer of 2020.

Witness today's text from Galatians. What does it mean that we have "crucified the flesh?" What does it mean to "belong to Christ Jesus?" What does it mean that we have a crucified God? More than sixty years ago the famous theologian Karl Barth was asked to summarize the Christian faith in one sentence. Barth is the guy who wrote a twelve- volume series of books on theology. He said with a smile, "The summary of the Christian faith is 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

So then the center of our faith is love. Not our love for each other or our love for the world but instead the center of it all is God's love for us. God came down and saved us. And he did all of that by dying, yes by being murdered by the human race. And yet, God loves us so much he holds on to us even now. I look forward each week to hearing about this Word made flesh, this passion and evil desire killer Jesus Christ. I keep looking for a message that pulls me into the party and makes me whole and declares me good. I want to hear about this crucified God, Jesus Christ who loves even me

Let us pray: Lover of humanity, you help me to understand, and to build my whole life on you. I am depending on your promises, God, and I am convinced that you alone will save me from sin and death loving me all the way into eternity. In the name of Jesus our crucified and risen Christ we pray. Amen.



Saturday July 11, 2020

Seventh Layer of Hope: THE ABUNDANT LIFE

Text: Galatians 5:25

"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

To you today, what is the abundant life? We are now in the middle of summer. Thousands of lakes and rivers are spread throughout the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and northeastern Wisconsin and they are full of summer loving people. The days are long and warm, the nights are cool. Even the Coronavirus pandemic cannot stop us from enjoying summer (though it has changed us in this summer of 2020) as we yearn for swimming and water skiing and long morning coffee times. We talk about "going to camp," or "going to the cottage," or "going off to the cabin", almost as the definition of the abundant life. Summer is a time of family and memories and the peace of a long afternoon of fishing, kayaking, reading a book or a taking a nap on the house deck.

There is something magical about this season. I have been saying for decades that my favorite months of the year are June, July and August. While I love summer, I also know that you cannot take summer for granted because it can rain or we can have early frosts that wreak havoc with the garden. Summer is a wonderful time, but it is short and fragile. After the Fourth of July, we begin to notice that the days are getting shorter. Summer is an amazing time in this area but of course, it is not perfect. It is in itself not the abundant life.

The Holy Spirit provides us with joy as a gift. In Galatians, St. Paul invites us into the abundant life as he calls us to “keep in step with the Spirit.” The job of the Holy Spirit, says Martin Luther is to call, gather and enlighten the church and in doing so, God delivers Christian community to us, the baptized people of God.

So what is on the agenda for today in your life? Is it a summer walk around the lake, a trip to have dinner with family, a little bit of painting or a couple hours taking care of the garden? Maybe you need to work today or visit your parents or grocery shop. Whatever you do, in the middle of summer, enjoy the moment. This moment is a gift!

Let us pray: *Almighty God, what a day you have provided to us! You, who create the beauty of summer, allow us to live in the Spirit, enjoying every moment. Surround us with your people. Energize us to build relationships that are pleasing to you. Allow us time to pause every day to thank you for the love you have given to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. What a day. Alleluia!*

