

1

When you look around this room, what do you see? I see a group of people filled with wisdom and experience, for many of you have shared your stories with me through the years, telling of the joys and struggles that you have faced. Many of you have learned amazing things about faith in the midst of life. Sometimes the greatest learning comes while facing the most difficult challenges, as Randy Pausch discovered when his doctor told him he had ten tumors in his liver and had 3 to 6 months to live.

He was a professor at Mellon University, where he gave his “last lecture,” highlighting the most important things he had learned in life.¹ He spoke about the importance of those childhood dreams he had, but more importantly, about helping others realize their own dreams. He shared one of the expressions that had become important to him: “experience is what you get when you didn’t get what you wanted.” We don’t always get what we want in life, and sometimes we may feel as though

our lives are filled with disappointment, but those experiences often help us learn valuable lessons in life. I don’t believe that God sends tragedies into our lives, but no matter what happens, God’s Spirit moves within us, helping us grow and learn, nudging us to share our wisdom with others.

I think that’s what David might have had in mind as he shared his last words, thoughts recorded in the final chapters of 2 Samuel. Although David was the youngest brother in his family, he had been selected as the next king of Israel, which did not go over well with the current king. King Saul tried to hunt down and kill David, but when Saul’s reign ended, David became king. David did some wonderful things as a leader, and yet, he was not perfect. You may recall the tragic example: the affair he had with Bathsheba while sending her husband into battle to cover up the resulting pregnancy.

I imagine David in his final days, reflecting on what he had done in his life, and how he had felt

2

God's Spirit speak to him as he offered his last words in 2 Samuel:

Whoever governs fairly and well,
who rules [with respect] of God,
Is like first light at daybreak
without a cloud in the sky,
Like green grass carpeting earth,
glistening under fresh rain."²

He trusted in God's guidance, though he also described the temptation to follow the wrong path as "thorns culled and piled as trash; better not try to touch them; keep your distance with a rake or hoe."

There are those times when we become more contemplative about the bigger questions of life, when we wonder about life and death and God and what comes after death. In her novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson tells the story of a minister who knew he was dying, an elderly man who had a son late in life. The book is about his memoir to

his young son, trying to pass on the wisdom he had gained throughout his years of ministry. In one entry in his memoir, he wrote about heaven:

"This morning I have been trying to think about heaven, but without much success. I don't know why I should expect to have any idea of heaven. I could never have imagined this world if I hadn't spent almost eight decades walking around in it. People talk about how wonderful the world seems to children, and that's true enough. But children think they will grow into it and understand it, and I know very well that I will not, and would not if I had a dozen lives. That's clear to me every day. Each morning I'm...amazed at the cleverness of my hands and at the brilliance pouring into my mind through my eyes—old hands, old eyes, old mind...What of me will I still have? Well, this old body has been a pretty good companion...And I must say, too,

3

that my mind, with all its deficiencies, has certainly kept me interested.”³

He didn’t know what heaven would be like, and yet, he could offer words of hope to his young son, reassuring him that even in the midst of the unknown places of life, that somehow we learn about the world through our minds and bodies, and in doing so, we sense that God moves within our limitations to offer us hope.

The story of *Gilead* and the story of King David remind us that our lives are not perfect; we are fragile beings, and yet, we can, along with God, offer hope to the world. And when professor Pausch faced the end of his life, he tried to offer hope through his last lecture, suggesting the following ways of trying to make the world a better place:

- Never lose the childlike wonder. It’s just too important. It’s what drives us.
- Help others.
- When people give you feedback, cherish it and use it.

- Show gratitude.
- Don’t complain. Just work harder.
- Be good at something, it makes you valuable.
- Find the best in everybody...you might have to wait a long time, sometimes years, but people will show you their good side. Just keep waiting no matter how long it takes. No one is all evil. Everybody has a good side, just keep waiting, it will come out.
- And be prepared. Luck is truly where preparation meets opportunity.⁴

We don’t have to wait until we face the end of life to offer words of hope. We can do that right now, which is something Amy Gopp has been doing in her role as the director of Week of Compassion. This past summer she took a trip to the Congo where she met a doctor who has done thousands of reconstructive surgeries for women who have been violated and mutilated. She recently wrote about her visit:

④

We were so touched by our visit to Eastern Congo. I was able to meet the women, sit with them, speak with them, and sing and pray with them. We wept, laughed, and embraced. I will never forget it. I came home determined even more to do something about the issues confronting them—but also to help educate others about sexual and gender based violence. To think that it only happens to the Congolese is simply naïve and inaccurate. One in three women in the U.S. have been victims of sexual and gender based violence. 1 in 3. Sadly, domestic violence and other forms of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) are a quiet curse in our own homes, schools and communities, and an important health issue facing all communities.⁵

¹ “Randy Pausch’s Last Lecture: Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams,” September 18, 2007, www.cs.cmu.edu/~pausch/Randy/pauschlastlecturetranscript.pdf
² *The Message Bible*

Today has been designated as Speak Out Sunday, encouraging congregations to recognize this issue and to strive to end gender and sexual violence.⁶ Maybe you know someone who has faced violence in her life, and possibly your words are the hope she needs to hear. Years later, when she possibly writes her own memoirs, maybe your kindness will be what encourages her to write words that could bring hope to another person, for words carry power and can shape the world into a better place.

May God’s Spirit bring you hope, inspiring your words that can echo throughout generations, whether written in your memoirs or spoken today.

³ Marilyne Robinson, *Gilead*, 2004, p. 66-67.

⁴ Selections from Pausch’s Last Lecture

⁵ www.weekofcompassion.org/updates/2012/11/14/we-will-speak-out-woc-responds-to-sexual-and-gender-based-vi.html

⁶ <http://wewillspeakout.us/>