



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5217

First broadcast February 1, 2009

WELCOME

Lydia Talbot: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel.

Our guest today is Dr. Thomas Long, the Bandy Professor of Preaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. He’ll be talking with us about hope.

Lydia Talbot: We also welcome back Joy Rogers, Provost of St. James Cathedral in Chicago. In our continuing series on the “Fruits of the Spirit,” she’ll be reflecting on “patience.”

Lillian Daniel: We begin with a profile of PBS host, Rick Steves, whose television programs and books have introduced millions of Americans to the adventures of European travel. For Rick, traveling the world is much more than taking a vacation, it’s an opportunity to encounter the diversity of God’s creation and God’s children. A few weeks ago we met with Rick in Chicago and asked him about the connection between his faith and traveling the world. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Rick Steves: I’m Rich Steves. I’m a travel writer. I live in northeast Seattle, in Edmonds, and go to Trinity Lutheran Church. I think the oldest possession I have in my life is a little Jesus, the shepherd, rescuing little sheep that I got when I must have been in Sunday school in first or second grade. I keep that with me. It reminds me that my parents raised me as a Christian. And, you know, you don’t have any choice when you’re a little kid. Then you have that time in college where you kind of go wandering around. I remember just being emotional and crying about things. It really occurred to me that there is something more to me than just a guy who’s looking for a job or looking to get an education. I felt the presence of God.

I’ve been lucky to do a lot of traveling. The travel really makes it clear to me that this is God’s creation. This world is just populated by what I see as, well, children of God, God’s great creation. I really feel like travel carbonates your awareness of everything and when you look at it as a Christian—the variety you celebrate, the hardships you feel, the love you are so thankful for, and the opportunities you embrace—it just gives life a lot more meaning when you are excited about the world and when you look at it as one of God’s children.

I spent the first half of my career just thinking of the simple aspects of travel: catching the trains, staying healthy, finding a cheap hotel. And then in my travels I went to mostly the developing world in India and Morocco and El Salvador, Nicaragua. Those are the places where I really realized, wow, there's a drama going on here! There are people struggling against structural poverty and I'm connected to that. I really felt I was connected to that. And I started thinking about our faith with the perspective of somebody in the developing world, in part because I was very inspired by the strength of the faith of the people that I met in the poor world. I'm impressed by the lack of faith I see, the shallow faith I see, in Christian, rich countries compared to the passion and the power of the faith I see in people in poorer countries. The irony is in the rich world we live our lives with a mindset of scarcity and in the desperately poor world, the people I've met live their lives with a mindset of affluence, of abundance. I thought: what's going on there? These people have like once a month they get chicken, the rest of the time it's rice and beans and they live life like it's a party, like it's a festival, like they're cup runneth over.

In our society—in my world—we're worried about insurance and long-term security, and where am I going to go on my vacation. It's very poignant. When you look at that honestly as a Christian and when you look at the world as God's creation and everybody on the planet is equally precious, boy, it's a poignant thing! That's what I love about travel. And as a travel writer that's why I like to bring it home.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: Rick Steves lives and works in Washington state, where he's an active member of a Lutheran Church. For more information about Rick Steves, you can visit our web site at 30goodminutes.org. Now let me tell you about today's speaker.

Dr. Thomas Long is the Bandy Professor of Preaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. A native of Atlanta, Tom is the author of 14 books on preaching and worship, and frequently appears at preaching festivals and workshops across the country. In a 1996 survey conducted by Baylor University, he was named one of the "Twelve Most Effective Preachers in the English Language." We are so delighted to welcome Tom Long back to "30 Good Minutes." Welcome, Tom.

MESSAGE

Tom Long: Thank you, Lydia. It's wonderful to be here.

A long time ago, Christians who were living in the land we now call Turkey, were in serious trouble. What had happened was that their Christian faith and their Christian ways of living made them stand out as different in their culture and aroused the suspicions, sometimes the hostilities of their neighbors. These early Christians must have felt much like some Muslims feel in America today. These Christians dressed differently than the people around them, they prayed differently, and people wondered if they were dangerous to the Roman government. Things got so bad for them, that some of them were getting very discouraged. They were beginning to lose their faith and lose their hope. So another Christian, perhaps in Rome, wrote a letter to these discouraged Christians in Turkey, to give them support and encouragement. That letter is in the New Testament, and we call it First Peter. Listen to some of what this letter says:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. [I Peter 1:3-7]

In her beautiful book, “Intensive Care,” Mary Lou Wiseman tells the moving and tragic story of the death of her fifteen-year-old son, Peter, from the terrible disease, muscular dystrophy. She tells about an astonishing thing that happened right at the moment of his death. Peter’s body was completely paralyzed in the final stages of his disease, and the delirium of death was taking over his mind in his last few minutes of his life. He was moaning, random and disconnected in his thoughts. His voice, wrote Mary Lou, “sounded so far away, so lost.” But then, suddenly, in a surprisingly clear voice, Peter spoke directly to Larry, his father.

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Bewildered and frightened, Larry and Mary Lou looked at each other. What could this strange question from their dying son possibly mean?

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Even though he had tears streaming from his eyes, Larry answered Peter matter-of-factly. “Impudent. Son, impudent means bold. It means shamelessly bold.”

Peter paused for a moment, death closing its grip on him, and then he said, “Then put me in an impudent position.”

And sure enough, just before their son died, Larry and Mary Lou, positioned Peter’s arms and legs in a posture of bold defiance, an “impudent position” in the face of death.

I think there is something to learn from this story about the nature of Christian hope. Christian hope is a kind of “impudent position” over against the powers of death. Christian hope is not something sweet and mild. It’s not wishful thinking: I hope it doesn’t rain this weekend or I hope the economy gets better soon. Christian hope is not even about progress, the hope that human ingenuity will bring in a brighter tomorrow: I hope they build an electric car that doesn’t pollute the atmosphere.

Those may be good hopes, but when Christians use the word hope, they mean something different by it. Christian hope is the faith that in a world of violence and warfare and suffering, that none of these things has the last word. That over against all of the visible evidence, love is finally stronger than hate, that life will prevail over death because God is bringing in a day when every tear will be dried, when justice will roll down like the waters, and death will be no more.

This means that Christian hope puts us in a kind of “impudent position” over against the powers of destruction in the world.

In the southern city where I live, in the 1950s the Ku Klux Klan every year used to march down the main street of the African American community. The Klan—these merchants of hate and racism—would hide under their hoods and robes and march arrogantly down the street. It was a frightening thing, and people would lock their doors and shutter their windows when the Klan marched down the street. But in the early 1960s, it began to be clear that change was in the air. Political change, yes, but more than merely political change.

God was stirring up the waters, bringing in a new day. You could feel God’s Spirit moving across the southland. And with hope in the air, when the Klan tried once again to march as usual down the street, this time people did not lock their doors or shutter their windows. With hope in their hearts, they weren’t frightened any more. They stood on the sidewalk and, as the Klan marched by, they laughed and they laughed and they laughed. And the Klan has never marched down that street again.

Christian hope is the confidence that God is bringing in a new day, a day of peace and righteousness, and it places Christians in an “impudent position” against the forces of destruction in society. Wherever there is warfare, Christians call for peace because of hope. Wherever there is hatred between people, Christians are called to work for reconciliation. Wherever there is illness, or loneliness, or despair, Christians are called to do works of comfort and tenderness. This is not because Christians are better than other people; it is because Christians are people of hope. Christians believe that God is making a new creation, and war and poverty, disease and death are obsolete. They are passing away.

But how do we know this is true? What’s the basis for this hope that God’s future is one of peace and light and life? Here is the main reason Christians have hope: we believe that we have already glimpsed this future, we have already seen what God is going to do, and we saw it on Easter morning. On Friday afternoon, the forces of injustice and violence and death won their usual victory. But on Easter, God destroyed the powers of darkness and raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is God’s impudent position over against the power of death in the world. When God raised Jesus, God put Jesus in an impudent position over against the forces of darkness. As the writer of First Peter put it, we have “a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Not long ago at the church where I worship, we were celebrating the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion. Our pastor stood behind the table and issued an invitation for all of us to come to the meal. He said, “If you are hungry for a world of justice, if you are hungry for a world of peace, if you are hungry for a world where every tear is dried and death and pain are no more, then come, come to this table and eat.” Now our pastor says something like this every time we have the Lord’s Supper, so most of us heard his words and we took them in stride. But there was worshiping with us that day a homeless woman who had come in that day to find some shelter against the cold, to be around other people, and to worship. When she heard those words, “If you are hungry for justice, hungry for peace, hungry for life, come” she jumped up from her pew, ran down the center aisle of the church, and fell on her knees at the table with her arms wide open.

We all recognized what was happening, and it brought our own faith to new life. This woman had no place to lay her head, but she had the most precious possession of all, the Gospel. She had hope.

So in a world of hunger, warfare, and despair, don't forget, we have been given a living hope through the resurrection. And now, because of this hope, we get out into that world and work for the homeless to find homes, we work for the hungry to be fed, we work for the troubled to find peace. Because of hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are placing ourselves in this world in an "impudent position."

CONVERSATION

Lillian Daniel: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Tom Long, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Tom Long. Tom, it was fascinating that in the conversation with Rick Steves he raised the issue of the pettier spiritual concerns of Americans, as opposed to the joyful abundance of folks overseas. You pointed that out in the example of the homeless woman who was so open to hope and the people in church who just heard those words and tuned them out. What's going on there? What prevents us from hoping for the big thing?

Tom Long: I think it's one of the great ironies that sometimes the people who have the least are those who have the most hope. It's probably because they are placed in a position where their only resource moving forward in life is a source outside themselves. The rest of us have kind of an illusion that we've got enough money, we've got enough education, we have enough resources to be able to make it on our own. So we believe more in progress than we do in hope. And they aren't the same thing.

Lydia Talbot: How do you see God's spirit of hope moving in our American society these days?

Tom Long: I think when we look for hope out in the culture, out in society, we look for what might be called signs and wonders. You look for green shoots here and there. We have seen it in the political process in this country, I think, as there's a sense of change in the air. But I want to emphasize that when we look, we look for manna, we look for little bits and pieces, signs and wonders here and there, because all of these signs of hope are fragile. If we put all of our hope in the political process or economic recovery, we'll be disappointed. But if we see these as little manifestations of that which is ultimately coming from the hand of God, we move on.

Lydia Talbot: Tom, your message is really a call to discipleship, a way of looking at the cross. Hope is the thing that is still there when our worst fears have been realized, isn't it?

Tom Long: That's right. And I think what hope does—and this is what makes this a call to discipleship and a call to radical discipleship—is that hope unmasks all the liars out there in the culture. The economic system will lie to you. It will say, "I can create hope, it will say." Or psychological therapy will sometimes lie to us and say "I can make you whole." Or education will say "I can make you wise." I believe in education and I believe in therapy and I'm glad we have a strong economic

system, but finally it is only that which is given to us by God that allows us move forward. It puts us in, as I said in the message, in a kind of impudent position over the powers of death and destruction.

Lillian Daniel: Do you think there's a way in which we're more comfortable hoping in things that we can control or that we think we understand, like education or politics or therapy, because we're sort of afraid of being unmasked by hoping in something more powerful?

Tom Long: That's right. You have to lean forward toward that which you don't possess and don't control if you live in hope. One theologian was pointing out that one of the signs of our lack of hope is that sometimes we say that we hope things *don't* happen—I hope the stock market doesn't crash again, I hope it doesn't rain next week—which has a kind of contentment and self-satisfaction with the status quo. But hope pushes you out on the edge of those things.

Lydia Talbot: And, of course, as you pointed out, hope is not wishful thinking, it is not optimism. But I must ask you about your amazing journey. Here you are distinguished, one of twelve—I would suggest fewer than that!—most outstanding, effective preachers in the English language. I mean, Tom, that's huge! Has there ever been a time in your spiritual journey when you have been on the edge, maybe without hope, facing despair?

Tom Long: Sure, in large and in small ways. When my daughter was born, for example, we found out within a matter of days that she needed fairly serious surgery and so we had the experience of handing our seven-pound daughter across the threshold of the operating suite. You're pressed on to hope at that point. She's healthy and wonderful today. It turned out fine. But you're at the end of your own strength and resources at that point and you're pressed out forward.

Lillian Daniel: And also that seems like that would be a situation where you had been so hopeful and then reality sets in and throws that off. I think when you go through a disappointment like that it makes it harder to hope the next time. How do you get back up on that horse of hope?

Tom Long: Yeah. I think that's why the community of faith is so important because for all of us faith and hope and love go up and down depending on our circumstances. So when we are fragile, we need people around us who are strong.

Lillian Daniel: Let me follow up, though. Sometimes when you're in a community of faith and you're going through something really difficult or you're grieving, people will sort of toss off that expression of, oh, you just need to hope and you need to hope in God, almost too casually in a way that doesn't honor the real worries or the real grief.

Tom Long: Well, I think a church is a mixed bag and amidst the ten pounds of baloney there is enough filet mignon to go there. There are people who have an authentic witness, an authentic voice of witness. I met a man recently who, in his 50s, was paralyzed from the waist down. We were doing a worship workshop and he came up afterwards and he said, "You know what my favorite hymn is? It's 'Lord of the Dance' because some day I will dance!" Now, he has to

struggle through every day with that paralysis but that notion of dancing ultimately keeps him going.

Lydia Talbot: You mentioned authentic witness. Talk to us about the church where you worship.

Tom Long: I worship at a church in downtown Atlanta and it has long had a ministry to the city. What's happening new in our life is that suddenly the people to whom we have ministered for 75 or 100 years are beginning to come in and worship with us and it's changing our worship and changing our preaching. We can no longer preach 'we should take care of the homeless because the homeless are us, as it were. They are there. They are part of the assembly.

Lillian Daniel: And you have to be so careful not to romanticize the life of poverty or to say casually that these people are more in touch with God in other countries. We have to be so careful not to trivialize that experience.

Tom Long: That's right. Poverty is not beautiful but poverty, like fasting, can deepen our spiritual awareness.

Lydia Talbot: And Christ had a preferential treatment for the poor.

Tom Long: He did.

Lydia Talbot: I'm back to the cost of discipleship: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and that whole resistance movement against Nazi Germany, from below, working for those who were reviled and oppressed.

Tom Long: It's interesting, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is always on the side of the poor. And so it comes as an absolute, astonishing surprise late in the book when he ministers to a rich man, Zaccheus. Suddenly the Gospel embraces everybody. But it has to strip away before it can include those of us who have the pride of resources.

Lillian Daniel: Tom, I know you're devoted to the church as an institution even though you see the baloney in it. What's your deepest hope for the church?

Tom Long: The theologian Karl Barth once said, "Do not fear the wrath of God; fear the love of God." The love of God will strip away everything that stands between you and God. I think we are going through one of those moments in the life of the American church where the barnacles are getting knocked off us and we're having that which is separating us from God being stripped away.

Lillian Daniel: And focusing back on what really matters, which is expressing the love of Christ to one another and to the poor.

Tom Long: That's right.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: We turn now to another in our series of closing reflections on the “Fruits of the Spirit.” Today, Joy Rogers, Provost of St. James Episcopal Cathedral in Chicago, reflects on “patience.”

REFLECTION

Joy Rogers: Patience: a virtue I pretend I have until I own that patience is not the same as procrastination. Putting off a call to act, to love, to risk, is not the same as waiting upon God. Patience is not apathy, not caring is not the same as staying open to an elusive Spirit and impossible newness. It’s not passivity, not a paralysis of hope or will or vision, rather a capacity to persist, to endure, to embrace brokenness in one self, in others, in the world and still believe that more is possible. Let it be, says Jesus, to those who would cut down the useless fig tree. Let it alone, says Jesus, to those who would ruin the growing grain to root out noxious weeds. And now patience sounds now like a costly way to forgive, to trust that God is still at work, and God will harvest a Gospel crop in God’s own time.

CLOSING

Lillian Daniel: Thank you, Joy, and our thanks again to Tom Long, Rick Steves and you for being with us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today’s program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may peace be with you in the week ahead.