

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC  
Danvers, MA  
Rev. Kevin M Smith  
May 27, 2018  
Romans 8:18-25

### *Practice Hope*

When I was a little boy as soon as I learned to read the newspaper, I read it every day. I remember reading the newspaper from cover to cover. I devoured everything about the newspaper—the smell of the paper and ink, the feel of the paper crinkling in between my fingers, the diversity of news, sports, entertainment, politics, and puzzles. Back then the ink they printed the newspaper with was not the smudge-proof kind they have now. My fingers used to get dirty with the ink and my mother used to get so frustrated with me because eventually those black fingerprints would show up on our white refrigerator! “Kevin Maurice Smith, you get in here and clean this up!” I would hear her shout from the other room. This happened more than once much to the great frustration of my Mom.

The best part of the paper was the comic section, of course. Beetle Bailey, Dennis the Menace, and of course, the best of the comic strips, was *Peanuts*! Lucy and Linus and Pig Pen, Schroeder, Snoopy and the Red Baron, Woodstock; and the best, of course, was Charlie Brown. I knew and loved the characters and the stories that Charles Schultz would weave in his colorful and meaningful panels on the comic pages of probably every paper in the country. One year, the *Spokesman-Review*, our home-town newspaper, printed poster-sized color pictures of all the *Peanuts* characters. They devoted an entire back full page of the paper to each character in every Sunday paper. (A pretty ingenious marketing tool I must say...) I couldn't wait for Sunday's paper to arrive on our doorstep! I cut out every one of those *Peanuts* character posters and taped them to walls of my bedroom. Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus, Snoopy, and the others kept me company and surrounded me all through junior high and high school. They were still on my wall when I turned 18, graduated from high school, and ran away and joined the Navy.

The first theology book I read was, I kid you not, *The Gospel According to Peanuts*. And, you thought I was taught theology at Harvard! Presbyterian pastor Robert L. Short wrote the book in 1965, and it became a runaway bestseller selling over 65 million copies. If you have not read it, I highly recommend it to you.

For some reason, my favorite story or scene in *Peanuts* was the continuing saga of Charlie Brown trying to kick that football out of the hold by Lucy. Over and over again Lucy would draw the football back just as Charlie's foot was about to make contact. Charlie would go summersaulting through air and land with a big “thud” on the ground, seeing stars swirling around his head and a look of intense frustration and bewilderment on his face. Poor old Charlie Brown! Do any of your know if there was ever a time when Charlie was successful in kicking the ball? (1981 TV special “It's Magic, Charlie Brown.”

Snoopy plays a magician in a magic show, turns Charlie invisible, and Charlie succeeds in kicking the ball! Another time, Charlie succeeds only by kicking Lucy's thumb and the ball flies.)

I always wondered why Charlie, over and over again, tried to kick that football fully knowing that Lucy would foil his hope. One thought, of course, is that it was about those who fail to heed the lesson of history are always doomed to repeat it. Another idea was that some people just really find it hard to change their ways, and both Lucy and Charlie were victims of this factor. The best theological reason, though, that I think is true is that Charlie, who never stopped hoping and believing in spite of all his troubles, in spite of all of Lucy's insults, continued to keep hope alive in his heart. After all, Charlie, with that crown of thorns design around the shirt he wore was the Peanuts Christ-like character. Jesus Christ never stopped trying, never stopped loving all kinds of people—the broken, the powerful and the powerless alike—and never stopped urging others to love their neighbors--the nice ones and even the not-so-nice ones. He persisted in all this knowing full well where it was leading him, and knowing humans would fail over and over again.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, which we read this morning proclaims,

*the difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, [and] the more joyful our expectancy.*

The longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy. Charlie Brown never gives up and Christ never gave up on the human race. Christ doesn't give up on you and me; Christ is ever present to us even when miss our mark, when we fail to connect with others or with God, Christ lives in hope against hope.

A big part of living with faith is finding meaning, and beauty, and hope even in the times when we fall flat on our backs. Even in those times when we are betrayed or neglected or oppressed or wronged— having hope, rather than giving in to despair, is the sign of faith.

My friends, if people keep calling you a “blockhead” as Lucy often did with Charlie, keep on keeping on. When our lives take a tumble and it seems that all is against us, know that God is right there with you. And sometimes, just sometimes, God works a little magic in your life and everything comes together for the good. I truly believe, my dear friends that if we live in hope, practice hope, spread hope, and believe in hope that all things will be well in the end. The Good News of Charlie Brown and of Jesus Christ tells us so. Amen.

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