

---

## *A Photograph, Loose Change, and Hope*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener  
Trinity Sunday – Year C**

Last week, a woman named Kim Phuc Phan Thi published an essay in the New York Times.<sup>[1]</sup> I had never heard of Ms. Phan Thi before, and my guess is, you haven't either. You would recognize her, though—or, at least, you would recognize her picture. You see, for 50 years now, Kim Phuc Phan Thi has been known round the world as “Napalm Girl.” This is because, in June of 1972, after being severely injured in a chemical attack while playing outside with her cousins, Phan Thi became the subject of perhaps the Vietnam War's most famous photograph—an image of a nine-year-old girl stripped naked, running down the streets of her hometown in pain and terror. The atrocity depicted in this photo was an occasion of horrific suffering. And yet it has not had the final word about Kim Phuc Phan Thi's life. In her recent op-ed piece titled, “It's Been 50 Years. I am Not 'Napalm Girl' Anymore,” Phan Thi wrote of her journey from debilitating mental and physical anguish to service as an international advocate for childhood trauma victims. Phan Thi acknowledged that she would never fully “get over” the terrible thing that had happened to her. When asked, though, whether the tragedy kept her mired in despair, she replied no, explaining, “I believe that peace, love, hope, and forgiveness will always be more powerful than any kind of weapon.” Questioned about how she had come to this belief, she spoke of her faith and of her church.

“We . . . boast in our sufferings,” the Apostle Paul writes to the members of the fledgling Church in Rome in this morning's epistle lesson. “We . . . boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us . . .” In the midst of an almost 2 1/2 year struggle with the sort of pandemic most of us had thought would occur only in a horror film; in the midst of social injustices many mistakenly believed we had overcome; in the midst of gun violence that just in the past month has taken the lives of elementary school children and their teachers, senior citizens making a Saturday afternoon grocery run, and twenty-somethings out for a night of barhopping—in the midst of all this, Paul's familiar words are especially poignant. For we have all suffered of late, both collectively and individually—we have all suffered with a depth and a breadth many of us had seen before only in photographs. And the pain continues. The pain continues. As someone observed recently, “We are trying to recover from a pandemic in the midst of a pandemic.” Everyday, it seems, there is something else difficult to face—something else that is somehow much harder to bear than the something else back in 2019 that might have upset us but would not have caused us to break down, asking all sorts of questions of ultimate importance and wondering how on earth we, or our world, are going to go on.

The Apostle Paul and the Roman Christians whom he addresses in this morning's epistle were no strangers to this kind of existential despair. Paul, in his writings, takes human suffering very seriously. He does not engage in any “toxic positivity.” He does not try to suggest that somehow all suffering is part of “God's plan.” He does not pretend that grief cannot destroy a person. Paul does not downplay human suffering. What he does do is to lift up hope not as the inevitable antithesis of suffering but, by God's grace, as the possible successor to it. Sound crazy? Maybe. But this is the very essence of Paul's faith—that, as he writes a bit later in his Letter to the Romans, “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”<sup>[2]</sup>

*If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.* Do you hear the great Good News in this? Do you get it? Here is a hope that, in the words of theologian Marva J. Dawn “does not capitulate before a certain future according to our own judgment or society's.”<sup>[3]</sup> In plainer terms, here is a hope that resists all absolute pronouncements by the powers that be of this world, whether those powers that be are a brutal empire bent on oppressing the poor, or chemical warfare raining down toxins onto innocent civilians, or our own

deflated psyches tying our stomachs up in knots whenever we contemplate our children or grandchildren's future. Here is a hope that manifests itself any time you or I act, even in what seems to us a very small and inconsequential way, act on the conviction that "goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death."<sup>[4]</sup>

In her book *Traveling Mercies*,<sup>[5]</sup> writer Anne Lamott tells the story of how she came to be a Christian. She had not previously been a religious person, she says, not by a long shot. And she did not really intend to go to her church the time she first did. In fact, she kind of stumbled upon it while out and about trying to cure a hangover. When Lamott walked through the doors of what would become her church that day, it was clear that she was not a regular. And she did not want to be, not for quite some time. Nonetheless, she kept going back. It wasn't because of the preaching, Lamott says. It wasn't because of the music. No offense to the liturgical feast we're celebrating today, but it was definitely not because of the pastor's ability to explain theological mysteries like the Holy Trinity. It wasn't because of any of this. Rather, Lamott says, it was because of stuff like this one elderly woman, a woman of very modest means who, week after week, brought plastic baggies filled with nickels and dimes she had collected and then slipped them to Lamott whenever she walked past her pew. Now what good, you might ask, would a few baggies worth of pocket change do for a woman like Lamott, who, at the time, was battling an eating disorder, joblessness, profound grief, and drug and alcohol addiction? Nothing, most reasonable people would say. Nonetheless, this woman kept on bringing those little baggies as an expression of hope. An expression of hope in God and of hope in Lamott, when Lamott herself had neither.

Dear People of God here at the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, each of us has within us this day some proverbial baggies filled with loose change. Some small strength, some encouraging word, some gentle ray of light, some capacity to sit with another person's pain, that may, quite unbeknownst to us, serve as a sign of hope to another fellow struggler in this broken and troubled world. Some gift, the offering of which might actually help us so that we, too, like the nine-year-old girl turned from a victim of war into an advocate for war's victims—so that we, too, do not get mired in the sufferings of this present time but are instead transformed by them for a higher purpose: the building up of the Kingdom of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom be honor, glory, and dominion, now and forever. Amen.

<sup>[1]</sup> "It's Been 50 Years. I Am Not 'Napalm Girl' Anymore." Kim Phuc Phan Thi, *The New York Times*, June 6, 2022.

<sup>[2]</sup> Romans 6:8

<sup>[3]</sup> Dawn, Marva J. *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society*. WJK Books, 2003.

<sup>[4]</sup> From a hymn text attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu

<sup>[5]</sup> Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. Penguin Random House, 1999,