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A Message of Hope

KELLY CLEM'S LIFE OFFERS TESTIMONY THAT, IN THE MIDST OF A CRISIS, GOD CAN PROVIDE THE ASSURANCE AND COMFORT WE NEED.



CHARLIE REGISTER

*K*elly Haugh Clem's voice is full of joy. It wraps each of her words in a warmth and relish for life that hardly seems possible for someone who has endured such unimaginable tragedy.

When she delivered her Religion-in-Life lecture to students and faculty gathered in Furman's Daniel Chapel on April 21, 2004, her voice conveyed the message she came to give. "Hope is a theme for me," she said. "Those are the lenses through which I choose to see life."

Clem, who graduated from Furman in 1982 with a degree in psychology and went on to earn a Master of Divinity degree from Duke University Divinity School (she also holds a master's degree in counseling), spoke about her experiences as a Methodist minister and titled her lecture "Hope in the Midst of the Storm."

We've all weathered a few "storms" in our lives, but for Clem, the storm was quite literal. In 1994, while she was serving as pastor of Goshen United Methodist Church in rural Piedmont, Ala., a tornado hit the church during the congregation's Palm Sunday worship service. The tornado took off the roof and knocked down the south and north walls of the church. Twenty members of the church died, including one of Clem's daughters, 4-year-old Hannah. Eighty-six others were injured.

The questions quickly followed. Those who heard the news wondered, "Why?" "How could this happen during a worship service?" "Where was God?"

But for Clem, there were even more important questions. "I don't think God calls for death," she said. "I don't think God made that tornado come to our church. I don't think it was anything that we did wrong. We live in a natural world. Tornadoes and hurricanes come, and we can't control those things. . . .

"A lot of times we ask, 'Why me? Why did this bad thing happen to me?' But I think God wants us to ask deeper questions. That is, what am I going to do about it? How am I going to respond to what's happened to me? I have plenty to cry about. In fact, most of us have a bucket of tears we keep to ourselves. But I believe God has a bucket of blessings if we'll only look for them."

Clem responded to the tragedy by looking for those blessings, despite her despair. "God did help us," she says today. "God gave us the strength to get through it, and that's no small thing. I look at what happened with sadness always, but also with deep, deep gratitude, because God was there to help us pick up the pieces."

The community was inundated with phone calls and letters of support. Clem received one of the most assuring letters from one of her seminary professors at Duke, Stanley Hauerwas. To her and her husband, Dale, he wrote simply: "You are not alone."



BY KAREN GUTH

And before the rubble had even been cleared, the Goshen congregation expressed a desire to worship together for Easter. “The biggest thing for me was that people called and said, ‘We have to worship for Easter. We have to be together for Easter.’ And at first I thought, ‘Oh, gosh, we’ve lost our church. I don’t have a job. I don’t have a place to go and have a church. I don’t have a parsonage anymore.’ I couldn’t imagine how we could worship for Easter.”

But they did. At the time, Dale was a college minister; his students brought folding chairs and a sound system to the church parking lot. Someone erected a wooden cross, and the congregation gathered on the lawn in the early morning. They faced the rubble, and a student sang “Holy Ground.” Kelly opened the service with words from Romans that had been reverberating in her head for days:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . For I am convinced that neither death, nor life . . . nor things present, nor things to come . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” These words expressed her conviction that “one of the greatest gifts of the Christian message is the assurance that we are not alone.”

But what affected her most that morning was the sunrise. “That said to me that it was a new day. God was still creating beauty. There was a newness and a freshness about life. That was the most significant thing for me that week — to see the sunrise, to stand there with my congregation, my family and friends for Easter and to celebrate that the resurrection of Christ is real.”

Clem also responded to the tragedy by celebrating the joy Hannah had brought to her life. She describes Hannah as a handful, a precocious and exuberant child who taught her a lot about spirituality. She recalls how Hannah would throw a ball into the air and get mad at God for not catching it, or swing on the swing set and imagine she was getting closer to heaven.

On one occasion Clem walked into a room to find Hannah talking aloud to someone. When she asked Hannah whom she was talking to, Hannah replied as though the answer was obvious: “I’m talking to God!”

Hannah’s deep spirituality showed in her love for the natural world. She often gathered acorns to give as gifts. She loved seeing the purples and pinks in the twilight sky, and she delighted in rainbows and in climbing trees. It is these very things that offer Clem hope and remind her of Hannah’s love for God and the natural world.

“After Hannah died,” she says, “I found myself drawn to any sign of new life: the pansies she had planted which kept blooming all summer, the oak tree seedlings where she used to plant acorns, and just anything that came out of the ground. We built a wonderful playground in her memory, and we love seeing

all kinds of people enjoying the swings and the slides. I truly believe God is trying to send us a message that there is always new life to be enjoyed every day of our lives.”

This recognition has given Clem a heightened sense of gratitude for life and those she loves. “I’ve learned the deeper things in life from this. I’ve learned not to take life for granted, not to take my children for granted. I hug and kiss my children and husband often, and I spend a lot of energy trying to keep the right balance of family and ministry.”

Since the tornado, Goshen United Methodist Church and Clem’s family have experienced a great deal of new life. In July of 1996, the congregation celebrated the dedication of a new church building, built in the shape of a butterfly, a symbol of rebirth. The stained glass window also pictures a butterfly and a rainbow, symbolizing hope.

A few months later, the Clems’ third daughter, Laurel Hope, was born, joining older sister Sarah. And a few years later, the family followed a call to missions work in Lithuania through the General Missions Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. Their missionary service included language training, missionary training and church visitations within the United States. In Lithuania they served as pastors in five cities, established two new congregations and trained leaders and laity.

Clem speaks with admiration of the people she met in Eastern Europe who have endured tremendous hardship — concentration camps, exile in Siberia, religious oppression, the nuclear accident in Chernobyl. These are people, she says, who have persevered through seemingly hopeless situations. Her ministry with them deepened her understanding of hope.

“I can see more clearly that we live in a world that is desperate for a message of hope,” Clem says. “The people of Lithuania had lost so much during the Soviet era, and they were hungry for a message of hope.”

The Clems have since returned to Alabama and continued to experience new life in their ministries. Dale is pastor of a church in Huntsville, and Kelly is planting a new church in Decatur — called “Hopesprings.”

She says, “When I was asked to give a metaphor for my new church, all I could think of was seedlings. We were just tiny seeds being sown everywhere, germinating slowly but surely.”

And as she looks ahead, what does she envision? True to her conviction, she sees a future filled with hope. “We just keep looking for God, everywhere we turn,” she says. “For me, and for us as Christians, there’s hope in any situation. . . . God has promised us a future with hope. It’s all in the way we look for God, and look for signs of hope.”

The author, a 2001 Furman graduate, spent the 2004-05 academic year as an intern in the Furman Chaplains Office. Holder of a master’s degree in religion from Harvard University, she is pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Virginia.