

## **Be Positive** Sunday, 11/15/20

Are you the kind of person who's more likely to see these water glasses half empty or half full? I couldn't find the origin of this question, but surely you've heard it before, usually in an attempt to describe you as either an optimist or a pessimist. It seems to be a very old expression that has been used in many different cultures, suggesting to me that the psychological phenomenon underlying it is as old as humanity. There are many snarky responses you could make to this question, my favorite being that the glasses are both half empty and half full. You might not have ever noticed that before, because the very question puts you in a frame of mind to choose one or the other. Still, some of us do tend to be more optimistic, while others of us are, shall we say, more realistic? There's a fun three-minute video on YouTube from Asap Science<sup>1</sup> that unpacks some of the science behind these attitudes, and I've included a link to it with your BMC Weekly Connection, at the end of the sermon description. Here's what I learned from watching the video.

We may be predisposed to see the glass half full or half empty based on our genetic make-up. There are at least two specific genetic variations that are associated with this personality trait. There are pros and cons to both orientations. Optimists tend to do better in school, earn more money, and recover faster from heart surgery, but they also tend to overestimate their abilities and underestimate risk. Pessimists tend to have a more cautious approach to planning their future and may live longer as a result of avoiding risky behaviors, including drinking and smoking.

Which would you call yourself? One estimate is that 80% of the general population has a general optimism bias, leading them to overestimate the probability of positive things happening in the future, and underestimating the possibility of negative events. For example, most newlyweds predict the probability of their getting a divorce as zero percent, even as the divorce rate in the U.S. is somewhere between forty and fifty percent. Are you one of the eighty percent or one of the twenty percent? I'm curious to know, so go ahead and post that.

Regardless of your disposition to optimism, even if it's influenced by your genes and the processing of serotonin in your brain, all of us can learn to be more positive, grounding

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9n2tmNWn1ec>

our outlook in a hope-filled appreciation of the present. Pessimists can learn to spend less time worrying about future dangers, and optimists can learn to put less faith in a future without any trouble. Being positive transcends optimism, because it's rooted in an informed faith. The key, according to the Apostle Paul, is to let Christ live at the very center of our lives. I'm reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 4, in The Message paraphrase, beginning with the fourth verse.

{Read Philippians 4:4-8, MSG}

Have you ever noticed how much of the teaching of Jesus, and that of his Apostles, is centered on how we live in the present moment? That's exactly where Paul starts, calling us to grow in being more positive by living each moment of each day as a celebration of God. Think about that! Do you remember the sad birthday song from the Early Word? Sometimes we live our days with a dual reality, saying in our minds that God is good and worthy to be praised, and yet at the same time moping about as if each day wasn't a gift to be celebrated. I especially appreciate Paul's exhortation to "revel" in God. To revel is to enjoy yourself in a lively and noisy way. There is no half-hearted revelry. When was the last time you reveled in anything, let alone reveled in God? That's a way of living that I want more of, and I really do want to grow in being more positive. But how can a recovering realist like me ever hope to get there?

Paul's first suggestion is the three "P's" of prayer, petition, and praise. We talked about growing in prayerfulness last week, and I said that the power of prayer comes first from the spiritual communion with God that prayer ushers in. That's exactly why and how Paul tells us in Philippians 4 to let Christ "displace" worry at the center of our lives. Prayer isn't a means of gathering all our worries into one place so that we can be weighed down even more. Prayer is a releasing of those burdens to Christ, whom we draw close to whenever we pray.

Paul's second suggestion to grow in being more positive is to meditate on things worth thinking about. I love antonyms, because by intentionally thinking about the opposite of something, it's often possible to see it in a new light. I added Snidey Whiplash here just to provide a slightly sinister ambience to the list as a reminder that this is the opposite of what Paul wants us to fill our minds with. Consider these antonyms that are either given or

implied in verse 8, and let them roll around in your heart briefly to feel their heavy darkness. You may even find that specific images or circumstances come to mind as you hear them, so take note of those as well: False, base, disreputable, counterfeit, unconvincing, rude, worst, ugly, and curseworthy.

A wise mentor of mine told me early on in my preaching to avoid the temptation to use too many negative sermon illustrations. Why? Because the world is so full of them, and they're all too plain for most of us to see. When we choose to dwell on what's wrong with the world- the false, the base, etc., we're copping out, taking the easy and obvious path instead of the faith-building and elevated hopeful path of Christ. It's easy for a realist to look and see everything that's wrong. But when we choose to dwell on those things, in the very center of our being, it can hollow us out as surely as if we'd been drinking acid.

Instead, Paul writes, make Dudley Do-Right your patron saint. Revel in God's goodness each day rather than wallowing in Satan's garbage. Let these words wash away the negative ones. Feel their healing lightness in your heart as you hear them and take note of any specific images or circumstances that come to mind. Meditate on what's true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious, best, beautiful, and praiseworthy. It's those things that we should be searching for and filling our minds and our speech with. Those are admittedly harder to find in this world, but Jesus never promised us that following him was going to be easy. If you need a little help remembering these words, I've included this picture with your BMUC Connection this week. You can print it out and carry it with you, or just grab a screen shot and make it your cell phone or computer background this week.

Mediating on positive words and images is a good start, but that's far from the end of what we need to do to be more positive followers of Jesus. Paul writes in 1Corinthians 13:2, "if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing." Making Christ the center of our lives through prayer gives us the eyes to begin to see what true beauty is, but we're also called to actively, willfully create Godly beauty, through the words that we use and the actions that we take to love others.

Imagine locking yourself away in a monastery and spending every day alone reflecting on the virtues of God. What good would that do? That's not the way of Christ, and that's not the way to follow Christ. We are blessed people called to bless others, by saying

and doing praiseworthy things. But remember, we can't just make ourselves do those things, either by force of self-will, inclination of our personality, or our genetic disposition to be optimistic. Our ability to do good in this world springs from our rootedness in Jesus and our ceaseless reflection on the goodness of God's character and creation.

Here's your homework for the week. Remember, I'm not asking you to do all of these things, but please do at least one of them to take a positive step forward in growing in being positive.

- Take the list of positive words from Philippians 4, along with Dudley Do-Right, and practice meditating on them throughout the week, letting those words guide your thinking, your speech, and your actions.
- Look for opportunities to use this rule of life from the Knutson household: "If it's going to be funny in two weeks, I might as well laugh about it today!"
- Interrupt your doom-scrolling through social media by taking regular breaks from Facebook and television news. Remember, "you are what you eat!"
- Make a point of giving daily compliments, to yourself as well as others. Remember, the goal is to revel in God, so turn those compliments into praise of your maker.
- And then there's always the old favorite of doing something nice for someone else. No matter what the sermon topic is, that one seems to always be appropriate.
- And as always, if none of those things are right for you, then come up with some other creative way to grow in being positive in a way that you haven't tried before.

Please take some time now to reflect on how you can grow in being positive this week. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



**Bill Reinhart, Pastor**  
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com