

“Looking up when we’re feeling down”

February 8, 2009

Text: Isaiah 40:28-31, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

I.

Some time ago, I read an article or a newspaper column where the author suggested—straight away—that *optimists have more friends*.

If you think about it, it’s probably true ... and why not? Don’t most of us—not all of us, perhaps, but certainly most of us—don’t we prefer to be in the company of people with a positive outlook? Don’t we prefer to be around people who typically see the glass *half full* as opposed to *half empty*?

I don’t know about you, but I run into people all the time who are die-hard *optimists*. I’m talking about people who are determined—day in and day out, week after week—to be upbeat ... *looking for the good*, the positive. My father used to always say—when asked what kind of a day he’d had: *I refuse to have a bad day; every day’s a good day*.

Thinking about this, I know people who, the older they get (and I don’t blame them), refuse to be around negative people ... people who are forever droning and groaning about whatever. Many of these are the same people (and sometimes I’m like that) who don’t like going to movies where they know—ahead of time—that there’s a sad ending.

Reflected on this, it may well be that optimists *do* have more friends. And again, why not? Their optimism is contagious. It picks us up.

An optimist can still be a realist. We can be realistic about our lives and still look for the good, lift up the positive and try to put a positive spin on things.

Having said that, this is not an invitation to be in denial about the world around us. Always, we should be encouraged to tell the truth about ourselves. With our economy sputtering and no cure in sight, these are seriously hard times we’re going through.

Everyday, it seems, there’s more bad news about companies going under, the employment picture and the problems our national leaders in congress are having in agreeing on viable solutions.

All of this, of course, is upsetting ... in part because it’s out of our control. However, one thing we can control is the way we choose to deal with it. In this sense, why not be optimistic. There’s nothing to lose and, not only that, we’ll apparently have more friends along the way.

Looking up when we’re feeling down ...

II.

One Sunday morning, a substitute Sunday School teacher couldn't open the combination lock on the supply cabinet. So she went to the pastor for help.

Well, let's see what we can do, muttered the pastor. *I know I've opened the lock before; let's take a look.*

Arriving at the supply cabinet, the pastor began turning the dial of the combination lock ... then, out of nowhere, he looked up to the heavens, began moving his lips silently, continued turning the dial and—just like that—opened the lock.

Seeing this, the woman was impressed: ***Wow, I'm in awe of your faith, pastor.***

Well, the pastor said? I appreciate that, but I have to tell you, the number is on a piece of tape on the ceiling.

This is a comical story. However, truth be told, *looking up* has its benefits in this world. Looking up ... looking for the good, the positive, wherever it is. Being an optimist ... having a positive outlook on things. Optimism is contagious; it feeds off itself.

Looking up is what people of faith do. It's what we do because—always—God is on the move. And God works through our spirit, our disposition, our faith and our small acts of kindness and goodness. God works through the love that we do.

III.

Our first reading this morning is from Second Isaiah, the great prophet the Exile, the historical period when Israel (everyone but the peasant class, for the most part) was deported to the foreign land of Babylon. Imagine that? Deported! Whisked away! This was, far and away, the most devastating period in Israel's life-story.

She'd lost everything. Of course, it was her short-sighted and sinful ways that had gotten her there. Sound familiar? We didn't just wake up one day to this economic nightmare we're in. It took years of greed and short-sightedness to get us here; years of deregulation and irresponsibility.

Still, God does not abandon Israel. And eventually, a powerful and poetic voice is raised up—a prophetic voice, speaking for God; a voice of relentless optimism that called people to a new hope and a renewed faith.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

This affirmation may sound almost trite and simplistic, but the reality was—off in exile, with hopelessness all around—Israel had lost her faith. By the time of Second Isaiah’s prophetic activity, it had been almost fifty years. Imagine the challenge of keeping the faith alive under such conditions!

And so, right away, Isaiah wants to sound a word of hope and a reminder of their faith:

Have you not known? Have you not heard? No doubt, some of them had known and heard, but many of them had been born in exile. And who knows what they’d known and heard. And so they needed to be reminded.

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

In other words, we’re not in our plight alone. Going on, Isaiah tries to lift their hope and inspire them to new expectations about tomorrow.

The Lord does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. And then, raising the pitch and the energy level:

*Those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed ...
They will rise up on wings like eagles;
they will run and not get weary, they will walk and not grow weak.*

IV.

Fervently, the prophet wants to call Israel back to faith. *Remember who you are! Stay positive ... trust in God.* Again, **Looking up when we’re feeling down.**

The KEY in all of this is *how* we look up. We can’t just *look up* as some passing fancy ... merely going through the motions. We have to *look up* as people of faith; and that means, as people of love.

Optimists look up. They look forward with hope and promise. People of faith look up. But we look up in a context of love and spirit and hope.

And why is that? Because we’re out there everyday trying to make things better. Reaching out to others, networking ... sharing helpful information; doing the little things, the daily acts of compassion and kindness.

That’s what people of faith do. When we shared communion last Sunday, in the breaking of the bread, we live out the reminder that we’re a solidarity; we’re all ONE.

And so, when we *look up* in our lives, we’re being positive—every day—doing what we can; remembering that we’re all in this journey called life, this boat called community; we’re all in it **together**.

What makes churches special, friends, is not just that they are sacred places where we meet God and wrestle with the deepest and most holy promptings of our faith journey.

Churches are also places where, at our best, we strive to be *the beloved community*. Of course, we're not perfect. But that's our vision. We seek to be a community, an extended family, a place where we can all come, give our worship, praise and prayers to God, and be loving Christian brothers and sisters to one another.

V.

There's a wonderful engaging and embracing spirit in our church in recent times (people talk about it all the time) and you're all a part of it. And as we seek to stand together in these tough times ... and to do whatever we can to be mutually supportive and uplifting, there are some things we can do to make things better ... little things, but important things nonetheless.

1. To begin with, we can become better acquainted ... in other words, get to know each other better ... learn each other's stories.

That's part of what *the beloved community* does. We seek to BE this sort of *beloved community*.

2. Secondly, assume that you make a difference. Because you *do*, and you *can*. Everyone here this morning has something they can contribute to ease the burden of these tough economic times we are going through.
3. Thirdly, however we respond to one another, *be creative*. Think outside the box. *Be* resourceful.

If we look at the example of the Apostle Paul in the reading I shared from **1 Corinthians 9**, that's exactly what he did. In trying to share the gospel with people and in his effort to build up the church, Paul *became all things to all people*. Which means, in part, that he became resourceful.

To the Jews, he became as Jew in order to *win* the Jews; to the Gentiles, he became as a Gentile, or as one *outside the law*, so that he might win them; to the weak, he became weak to win the weak. Again, he became *all things to all people*.

What this means, of course, is that he did what he needed to do to relate to people, to make a connection and to make room for them in his life.

When we listen to each others' stories, it's a growing experience. That's what love does. Love listens with compassion and kindness. It's in this way that we strengthen and continue to build up *the beloved community*, which is our church.

VI.

And so, in these tough times, let's look ahead with confidence and hope ... so that the words of Isaiah don't fall on deafened ears:

***Those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed.
They will rise up on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary;
They will walk and not grow weak.***

My appeal to us today is to choose to *look up* and stay *positive*; and make an effort to get to know one another, to learn each others' stories so that—together—we can work our way through these tough days.

4. And finally, as people of faith—trusting in God's divine providence—as we seek to BE God's *beloved community*, let us support one another in prayer. Prayer makes a difference. Our prayers draw us into each other's lives.

In this spirit, may these words of St. Augustine inspire us and nudge us—day after day—to higher ground ...

Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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