

“Optimism in the Face of Pessimism”

Romans 8:18-28

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

August 1, 2021

University Baptist Church

Minneapolis, MN

Today’s sermon is the fifth in our Grab Bag series that began in July. We have four more Sundays of grab bag sermons, so if you want to make a suggestion, just write it on a piece of paper and we’ll add it to the mix. Who knows, your topic might be the next one selected.

This week’s topic is “the optimism of faith in the face of pessimistic reality.”

Would that it were so easy as optimism and pessimism.

The question is the optimism of faith in the face of pessimistic reality. A faithful glass half full perspective when in reality the glass has been tipped over. Even those of us who are optimists are far from having our cups runneth over.

The question might well be about faith (optimism) vs. reality (pessimism). Not all faith is optimistic. Some is downright fatalistic. Not all reality is pessimistic. Some is fraught with tension and includes triumph. The question, I think, is how to make sense of the world and our place in it. Isn’t that the basic question we grapple with every Sunday, regardless of what you put on this piece of paper?

Optimism despite evidence can be foolishness. Pessimism, especially the unfounded kind, can be a tool of control. Think of the debate over election fraud. It’s a pessimist’s argument that the system is broken (even when it is not). Then rallying a group of pessimists can be a control mechanism, proving that world-view as gospel truth. You can’t talk yourself out of pessimism. It is a vortex. It’s like swimming up through a whirlpool.

You can’t succeed if you are pessimistic.

You need optimism to be successful.

Pessimism isn’t the same thing as depression, but there are similarities.

Optimism isn’t the same thing as delusion, but like history, it sometimes rhymes.

For this old swimmer, watching the Olympics stirred all of those old emotions. The anxiety, the excitement, the need to psych yourself up. My swim coaching daughter instills in her athletes the necessity of PMA (positive mental attitude). You need to envision the best result in order to attain it. Yogi Berra said that sport is 90% mental, the other half is physical.

Optimism and pessimism.

We need only look at Olympic athletes to see how debilitating pessimism can be. If you convince yourself you can’t do something, chances are you will be proven right. On the other hand, if you convince yourself you can do the impossible despite the evidence, this kind of optimism can be deadly. Much ink has been expended on Simon Biles’ decision to pull out of Olympic competition. She had nothing more to prove. She recognized that not being in correct head space could have injured her or killed her. She made a champion’s decision. Let’s hear it for Simone and mental health.

People have used Romans 8:28 “all things work together for good for those who love God.” as a way to whitewash suffering. All things do not work together for good on their own. Some things work together for bad. But the key for a faithful person is to find ways to conspire to make things work together for good.

In today's passage, Paul builds on the topic of suffering, patience, bondage and redemption he began in Romans. But he frames it as hope and love. Those are the things of optimism. In Romans Chapter 5, he says, "We boast in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." Suffering begets, endurance, begets character, begets hope which is all part of love's plan. This is what faith looks like. Not simple Pollyannaish optimism, but intentional life lived for a purpose that is bigger than us.

He likens hope to childbirth. There is pain, but the pain is there for a reason, so you endure the pain so that you can give birth to something new. It sounds so easy. But many of us know how hard childbirth can be. Filled with anguish and feelings of injustice. Why do I have to put up with this? And women endure this because of the hope on the other side. Is that optimism? Faith? Perseverance? Wonder Woman work? Probably a combination of the above.

Paul says we wait with patience. But patience is not the same thing as acquiescence. Patience is persistence. It's not satisfied with the present, but lives in view of a future promised and worked for. Hope also fuels imagination. It's no accident that "inspired" means to have the Spirit.

People in positions of domination are counting on our pessimism. They want us to give up and not resist. Resistance is futile they say. Accept pessimism as the reality they set. They want us to fall into the lines they set. But there is something about faith that is playing by a different set of rules.

Clarence Jordan once said that faith is not optimism in spite of the evidence. It's rather action in the scorn of the consequences.

Optimism and pessimism are forms of resistance. Optimism perhaps needs pessimism to tame it while pessimism needs optimism to break out of its maudlin cycle.

There's a scene in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* which speaks to this. Andy DuFrane has been pestering libraries to send him books for the inmates. In order to shut him up they send a crate of books and included in it is a few records. Andy, who has befriended the guards takes out a record and hooks it up to the PA system of the prison. Two women sing a duet from an opera and the prison freezes. Beauty invaded their hopeless lives and they were transfixed. Once the guards saw how the prisoners were reacting, they started to threaten Andy. He looked at them through the glass of the locked door, smiled and turned up the volume.

Andy was punished by spending two weeks solitary confinement the hole. When he returns to the lunchroom he tells his friends that his two weeks was the easiest time he'd spent, because he had Mozart to keep him company. "Don't forget", he says, "there are places in the world that aren't made out of stone. That there's something inside that they can't get to that they can't touch. It's yours." "What you talkin' about?" say his table-mates. Andy responds, "Hope." His friend Red shakes his fork at him and said "hope is a dangerous thing. It will drive a man insane. Hope has no place in here. So you had better drop it." He stormed off.

At the end of the film, you hear Red say these words: "I hope I make it across the border, I hope to see my friend and shake his hand, I hope the Pacific is as blue as in my dreams, I HOPE."

Clarence Jordan penned the Cotton Patch version of the New Testament while living at Koinonia Farms in Georgia. Here is his translation of a passage from 2 *Corinthians*:

*"We who live for Jesus always flirt with death, in order that Jesus' life may be all the more evident in our fragile flesh. So while death is operating in us, life too is in you. Having the same spirit of faithfulness described by the Scripture, which says, 'I acted, then I talked,' we too act, then we talk. We are sure that the One who made the Lord Jesus to live again will also make us alive and stand us all up together.*

*Really, this all happened for you, in order that kindness which overflows onto many might swell up as a mighty prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God.*

*"And that's why we don't poop out. Even if we look worn out on the outside, we are constantly refreshed on the inside. After all, it will turn out that our little old troubles will be more than outweighed by our eternal glory. We just don't put any stock in outward things but in inner things. For outward things are perishable, while inner things are eternal."*

I find myself optimistic when I hear stories of those who push back with faith against a reality that squelches hope. Here's something that came over social media this past week from Barbara Mack:

**July 20 at 11:39 PM**

"I may have inadvertently started a revolution in the convenience store today. I stopped to grab a water, and on the way in I saw a homeless man I know sitting in the shade with his bike beside him. He was red-faced and shaky looking. I asked if he was ok, and he told me that he was just resting. This guy's got the mind of a child, and I'm afraid he doesn't know he needs to stay extra hydrated when it's super hot outside. There were a bunch of people in line in front of me and only one cashier, so I grabbed two waters and yelled to the cashier that I was taking one to the guy outside and I'd be right back (I'm a regular there).

When I came back in, the lady in front of me turned around, hands on hips, and told me that I was just enabling that 'homeless person' (said with a sneer) and that I shouldn't be wasting my money on him.

It's hot as hell in Florida right now. Mid nineties with humidity around 80%. It's a good day for heat stroke, and I told her so. I said I'd rather give him a water than call an ambulance.

I was gonna shrug it off. Let it go. Chalk it up to ignorance and the heat making everybody cranky.

And then she told me I should be ashamed of myself. That someone should call the police on him, and that it should be illegal to beg for money. That people who give the homeless money just encourage them to stay homeless and that should be illegal, too. Ashamed. I should be ashamed for giving some poor old guy a water - it cost a whole dollar, BTW - and I should get in trouble for making sure he didn't stroke out in this heat.

I guess I look nice. Approachable. Like I wouldn't rip your head off. I am nice, most of the time. But not always.

And I lost my temper. I told her to call a cop and report me for buying shit at a convenience store. I told her that I wasn't in the damn mood for crazy right now. That it's a hundred fucking degrees outside, and I'm hot and tired and sick to death of stupid people. That if she had an ounce of compassion in her whole body, she'd buy him a cold drink, too. That maybe she should figure out why she needs to accost complete strangers.

And how's about after that, she back the fuck up outta my face and outta my business and turn back around and not say one more damn word to me.

I'm just about deaf in one ear. I try to modulate my voice. Unless I get angry. It got pretty loud there at the end. There was dead silence in the store and then someone said loudly "For real!"

And the guy at the front of the line told the cashier to add a sandwich to his purchases for the guy outside. The guy behind him bought an extra ice cream. The girl behind HIM got change for a twenty 'cause that guy could probably use some cash.' Every single person in line got him something. Every one, except the now very embarrassed lady in front of me, who slunk out without saying another word.

When I got to the cashier, she didn't charge me for either of the waters, because she was going to take him one anyway. And mine was free because of the entertainment. When I went outside, he was eating his ice cream and drinking his water with a pile of stuff all around him, a big old grin on his face. He didn't look shaky anymore.

And there, people, is the story of why I hate people. And why I love people. All in the same damned minute.

I sat in the car and drank my water and laughed with tears in my eyes, same as I'm doing now."

My friends, as Wendell Berry said, Every day do something that does not compute.

*Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing.*

*Take all that you have and be poor.*

*Love someone who does not deserve it.*

*Denounce the government and embrace the flag.*

*Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands.*

*Give your approval to all you cannot understand.*

*Praise ignorance, for what man*

*has not encountered he has not destroyed.*

*Ask the questions that have no answers.*

*Invest in the millennium.*

*Plant sequoias.*

*Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant,*

*that you will not live to harvest. Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold. Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.*

*Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years.*

*Listen to carrion--put your ear close, and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come. Expect the end of the world.*

*Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable.*

*Be joyful though you have considered all the facts...*

*Swear allegiance to what is nighest your thoughts.*

*As soon as the generals and the politicians can predict the motions of your mind, lose it.*

*Leave it as a sign to mark a false trail, the way you didn't go.*

*Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.*

*Practice resurrection.*

Embrace the optimism of faith in spite of a pessimistic reality.  
Let it be your little act of resistance.  
Live your life as the blessing that you are.