

Message: Good News Fills Buckets¹

Visiting Pastor (a joke)

A pastor went out one Saturday to visit church members. At one house, it was obvious that someone was home, but nobody came to the door even though the pastor knocked several times. Finally, the pastor took a card, wrote “Revelation 3:20” on the back of it, and stuck it in the door.

“Look! I’m standing at the door and knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to be with them, and will have dinner with them, and they will have dinner with me.”

On Sunday, the card turned up in the offering plate. Below the pastor's note was written “Genesis 3:10”:

“I heard your voice ... and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

It’s good to have a little humor as we gather to worship today.

As a point of information, I call before I come to visit. If you don’t answer your phone, then I might try knocking on the door. The best way to be sure you know: send me an invitation.

We’ve been talking about what’s right with people. Specifically, we’ve been learning about the power of positivity, of positive emotions – filling buckets. Negative emotions like stress, anger and hostility are known to damage our mind and body. Positive emotions have positive effects on our mental and physical health. Positive emotions enable faster recovery from pain, trauma and illness. They can help buffer us against depression, anxiety and other psychological challenges.

Positive emotions have even been linked to longer life. “A study of 180 elderly Catholic nuns revealed that nuns with more positive emotions lived significantly longer than nuns with fewer positive emotions. The researchers compared handwritten autobiographies each woman wrote in their twenties, scored them for positive emotions and then compared it to mortality rates when they were 75 to 95 years old.

¹ Material drawn from Rath and Clifton, *How Full is Your Bucket?*, Gallup Press, 2004, pp. 57-77

The result: those who reported more positive emotions lived ten years longer on average. To put it in perspective, cigarette smoking has been shown to reduce life expectancy by 5.5 years for men and 7 years for women. Negative emotions might cut more years off your life expectancy (10 years) than cigarette smoking! There’s no surgeon general warning for negative emotions, but maybe there should be.”²

Barbara Fredrickson, director of the Positive Emotions and Psychotherapy Laboratory at the University of Michigan, has done a lot of research. “She says that positive emotions are more than signs of well-being. Positive emotions improve coping and help well-being in the present and the long-term.

She summarizes the benefits of positive emotions in this way:

- Positive emotions protect us from the effects of negative emotions and can undo negative effects;
- Positive emotions make us more resilient and give us a “reserve” of durable physical, intellectual, social, psychological and, I believe, spiritual resources during trying times;
- Positive emotions broaden our thinking, encouraging us to discover new ways of thinking and acting;
- Positive emotions break down racial barriers; and
- Positive emotions help individuals and groups function better.”³

I believe, we’ve just scratched the surface when it comes to the power and impact of positivity.

Consider what Jesus said, “*You’re here to be light, ... God isn’t a secret to be kept. We’re going public ..., as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven*” (Matthew 5:14-

² *Ibid*, pp. 59-61

³ *Ibid*, p. 62

16, MSG). I don't know about you, but that sounds like a call to fill other peoples' buckets to me.

You may be wondering: “isn't being positive or negative genetic and kind of hard to change?” It's complicated, but the short answer is “yes.” Some people seem to be born with a negative disposition. At the same time, other people seem to always be positive. There are different scientific views. The most common theory is that both nature and nurture make significant and likely equal contributions.

Psychologist Ed Diener describes our capacity for positivity as having a “baseline” measure, kind of like our physical weight. While we may be predisposed to a certain weight, no matter what we eat, that can change over time. The same is true for positivity. It wouldn't hurt most of us to go on a health diet of more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions. No matter where you start, regular bucket filling can increase your positivity, leading to a better, healthier and more productive life. One way to do that is to receive daily drops in our bucket from friends and family. When that happens over a period of time, we build a reserve that will last us and can be sustained during tough times.

I've wondered what an overflowing bucket would be like. If our bucket is overflowing, it means the additional happiness or positive emotion we have flows into others, a bit at a time. Part of the surplus fills our reserve as well, a bit at a time. Just like raindrops, these bits fall on anyone who is nearby. Our spouse, children, family, friends, co-workers and even people we randomly meet all benefit. I believe this is why random acts of kindness have such a powerful impact.

Paul wrote, *“What a person plants, they'll harvest. The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others - ignoring God! - harvests a crop of weeds. All they'll have to show for life is weeds! But the one who plants in response to God, letting God's Spirit do the growth work in them, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life. So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we'll harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit. ... every time we get the*

chance, let's work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith” (Galatians 6:8-10, MSG).

As followers of Jesus, we have good, bucket-filling news to share. Jesus rose from the dead. That means we can trust God. God's promises are true. God's promise of life filled with love and hope is ours for eternity.

I don't about you, but that fills my. I go to God's Word and spend time in prayer, seeking God's presence. And I find it. No matter how harsh the circumstance or how awful I feel, when I admit my fears to my spirit, I'm admitting my fears to God's Spirit living in me. God hears my fear and works through the Holy Spirit to guide and protects my soul. That's grace in action. The same is true for you when you read the Bible and pray. Your soul communes with God's Spirit and you are guided, protected and healed, a bit at a time.

For example, like most of you, I have been greatly troubled by the actions occurring at our border. I read and heard about the separation of children from parents and it tears at my heart. Those of you who read my Facebook posts know what I'm saying. What can we do? We need to take action.

Jesus fills our buckets when we go to him. We find a way to cope. We find wisdom in advocacy for those who are at risk. We can give thanks to those on both sides, even when the steps are small and the problems have been with us for a long time. We need to pray for discernment and the political will to address immigration in a bipartisan way, regardless of our positions. When we read how some have perverted the Bible to justify injustice, we're led to pray for God's grace to lead us to a better understanding of God's Word. I know I found myself praying for more people to actually read and reflect on what Jesus said, rather than taking words out of context.

I'm not trying to offend anyone or inflame our coffee hour discussion. What I'm offering is a way for our heart to find peace. We need to forgive, think of others and look for ways to be reconciled in love. That's the only way for us to shine light into the darkness and find

solutions that the Holy Spirit is already working on. That’s how we can move past the negative to the positive. These are real, complex and difficult problems. They require great faith, hope and hard work. Without finding a way to fill buckets to overflowing, we’re operating on rapidly dwindling reserves. Our hearts turn to war, not peace.

I invite you to join me in prayer this week. Let’s pray for the families affected. Let’s pray for those who see no choice for life other than taking such great risks. Let’s pray for our president, congress and leaders who need wisdom, discernment and the will to act. Let’s pray for the people of our country, that we would find ways to move past positions and ideologies and back into life-giving relationships. Most of all, let’s pray for those in the church, for our voice is becoming more irrelevant and distant the further we move from following Jesus in love.

Let’s pray for buckets to be filled to overflowing with love.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Let us pray ...

Almighty God, we need you. Our hearts are sore, our minds filled with conflicting emotions and our soul is not in harmony. We, your children, need your protection, guidance and grace. Help us when we give in to the powers of evil, injustice and oppression. Forgive us when we do harm to others in what we say, think and do. Forgive us if, by our inaction and selfishness, we allow others to come to harm on our watch. Lord, we need your wisdom. We need your grace. Most of all, we need for the good news of Jesus and his life-giving love to fill us all, so that we may once again act and behave as your children. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Proverbs 4:18-19 (CEB)

The way of the righteous is like morning light
that gets brighter and brighter till it is full day.
The path of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they don't know where they will stumble.

Matthew 5:14-16 (CEB)

You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

(The Message)

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.