

“All The Wonderful Things”

Luke 13:10-17

One Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue.
And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit
that had crippled her for eighteen years.

She was bent over,
and was quite unable to stand up straight.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said,
“Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”

When he laid his hands on her,
immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue,
indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath,
kept saying to the crowd,
“There are six days on which work ought to be done;
come on those days and be cured,
and not on the sabbath day.”

But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites!

Does not each of you on the sabbath
untie his ox or his donkey from the manger,
and lead it away to give it water?

And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham,
whom Satan bound for eighteen long years,
be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

At these words,
all his opponents were covered with confusion,
while the mass of the people were delighted
at all the wonderful things Jesus was doing.

All The Wonderful Things

Luke 13:10-17

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I.

“Our happiness depends on the habit of mind we cultivate.” Take a moment to give that some thought. This quote, and the premise behind it, are to be found in a book entitled The Power of Positive Thinking: A Practical Guide to Mastering The Problems of Everyday Life, written by the Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale which was first published in 1952.

Born in 1898 in Southwestern Ohio, Peale received his bachelor's and master's degrees in sacred theology from Boston University, then attended Syracuse University where he received a Doctor of Divinity. A Methodist minister, Peale served New York City's Marble Collegiate Church for 52 years. During his career, Peale wrote over 40 books, was a sought-after motivational speaker, started weekly radio and television shows, and co-founded the spiritual newsletter *Guideposts* with his wife, Ruth Stafford Peale.

II.

The Power of Positive Thinking, however, proved to be Peale's greatest claim to fame. Published at a time when Christian church attendance was drastically increasing, national views of spirituality, individuality, and religion were shifting, and the Cold War was a growing concern for many Americans, the book became something of a cultural phenomenon, selling over 2.5 million copies in two years. The book provides anecdotal "case histories" of positive thinking using a biblical approach and practical instructions designed to help the reader achieve a permanent and optimistic attitude. These techniques usually involved affirmations and visualizations which, Peale claimed, would give the reader a higher satisfaction and quality of life. Though negatively reviewed by scholars and health experts, the book was *extremely* popular among the general public. It was eventually translated into 40 languages and, to date, has sold over 15 million copies. I remember my grandmother even having a copy.

III.

To give you a little sense of the book, it begins by stating ten rules for “overcoming inadequacy attitudes and learning to practice faith”:

1. Picture yourself succeeding.
2. Think a positive thought
to drown out a negative thought.
3. Minimize obstacles.
4. Do not attempt to copy others.
5. Repeat “If God be for us, who can be against us?” ten times every day.
6. Work with a counselor.
7. Repeat “I can do all things through Christ
which strengthens me” ten times every day.
8. Develop a strong self-respect.
9. Affirm that you are in God's hands.
10. Believe that you receive power from God.

In summation, Peale’s treatise is this:

“The way to happiness: Keep your heart free from hate, your mind from worry. Live simply, expect little, give much. Scatter sunshine, forget self, think of others. Try this for a week and you will be surprised.”

IV.

In the word’s of Col. Potter from the TV series MASH: “HORSE HOCKEY”. While I would agree it is certainly better to view the glass as half full rather than half empty, what matters most is what is actually *in* the glass and whether you can drink from it or not.

Though the ideas presented by Peale in The Power of Positive Thinking are certainly apPEALing, as evidenced by the sale of 15 million copies of the book, they represent the path of least resistance; which, while scenic and easily traversed, eventually leads to nowhere. While I have neither the background or expertise to offer a psychological critique, that a diminished theology is at work is certainly evident to my eyes; and, I’m guessing, to yours as well. Rather than dwelling in the grace of the Garden, Peale instead invites the reader to reach for the low-hanging fruit. Fruit that has been forbidden, and for very good reason.

V.

Peale's Power of Positive Thinking is a classic example of extolling the virtues of a "Works Theology." A theology which places the individual at the center of a universe with God merely in orbit around them. A theology which encourages and emphasizes a false redemption to be found through the work of *our* own hands rather receiving and responding to the grace of *Christ's* work on the cross already won for us and, now, freely given. A theology which gives the quick blast of a sugar high rather than a nutritious and sustaining spiritual diet.

Frankly, as minister, Peale should have known better. Both in terms of ignoring the critical importance of living one's faith within the context of a community of believers and, moreover, in removing God from THE central role. Though I may be overstating it, my sense is that to some degree or another Peale ushered in the current era of religious populism and "Me-Centered" spiritually so insidiously commonplace these days.

VI.

At this point, you might rightly ask why I would choose to introduce Peale and his Power of Positive Thinking here this morning only to labor so hard to dismiss it? The answer is simple: so we can see the mistake for what it is and, thereby, avoid making it. When I first started to consider today's scripture reading from Luke 13, I realized that many might hear this story as a criticism of those who persist in seeing the glass half-empty. We all have experienced those people who revel in finding the flaw, who take a raincheck on rejoicing, and who flood the field with negativity. Folks who are strangely adept at finding a reason to say "No" rather than welcoming the "Yes" with lies right at their feet. A woman crippled in spirit for 18 *years* was relieved of her ailment, that's true. But, WAIT, it was the *sabbath*. Clearly, the leaders of the synagogue missed the memo about the Power of Positive Thinking.

VII.

They also missed the memo about caring more for people than process, about honoring compassion over protocol or, to bring it closer to our own Presbyterian doorstep, about opting for decency above order; every...single...time we are confronted with such a choice (which happens more often than we realize).

While it is certainly the case that a life lived with any form of intention is almost always better than a life lived without any intention whatsoever, at some point the specific *nature* of that intention must begin to matter. Unfortunately, Peale creates a false dichotomy between optimism and pessimism which misses the virtue and value of a simple realism in recognizing and appreciating all the wonderful things. All the wonderful things Jesus was doing in today's scripture reading and, more to the point, all the wonderful things God is doing in our own lives.

VIII.

Despite my criticism of Dr. Norman Vincent Peale this morning, there is one thing about which he is absolutely correct: "Our happiness depends on the habit of mind we cultivate." However, rather than cultivate a habit of positive thinking, I would suggest a habit of awe, wonderment and gratitude toward our lives and the world in which we live.

God is doing wonderful things *all* the time and *all* around us. I know, because I can see them in each of you every day; and, if I am to be completely honest, most days I can scarcely take it all in, and some days it is almost more than I can bear. It is too big, too humbling, too courageous, too strong, too tender, too humorous, too real, too immediate, too deep, too loving, too heart-wrenching, too heart-warming, too surprising, too resilient, and too wonderful to be fully and finally comprehended. At least by me, anyway; and *believe* me, I've tried.

IX.

Friday morning, when I was writing this sermon, I sat in my chair for 20 minutes with hands hovering over my computer keyboard trying to figure out how to end this sermon. What I would *like* to do is to tell you story after story (anecdotal case histories, if will) about how I see you, how you make me feel, how you inspire me, how you compel me to spend my days and my life caring for you, how I realize that no matter what I do it will never be enough, and certainly no where near what you have earned or deserve. Stories about parents in the midst of raising families, of resilience in the face of grief and loss, of struggle, of joy, of profound caring, of awesome effort, of abiding love, of honorable action, of stunning kindness, of fidelity to spouse and family, of noble work and tireless toil, of forgiveness, of commitment to community, of efforts above and beyond, of egos yielded, of courage in the midst of loneliness, and stories of celebration and triumph.

X.

I realize, though, regaling you with all of these stories would make for a very long sermon indeed. Then I realized this is the very thing I do in every sermon, in some way, shape or form, one Sunday at a time. So, for this Sunday, I would simply like to thank you, each of you and all of you, for all the wonderful things you do, and for the wonder that you are. Those who can make it to church on Sunday, those who join in for worship via the stream and those who read or watch the sermon each week. You have challenged me, inspired me and supported me to cultivate a habit of mind which has brought me happiness, certainly, but so much more than that. How could I not but think positively about all of *you*, this humble but awe-inspiring church of *ours*, the life we share, and the future which awaits *us*. I am delighted by all the wonderful things God is doing through you. Thank you. Amen.