

**THE PAYOFF OF POSITIVE THINKING**  
**HEBREWS 1:1-4; 2:5-12**  
**OCTOBER 5, 2003 – WORLD COMMUNION**  
**THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

It is World Communion Sunday. We welcome to the table today the boys and girls of our first and second grade who participated in our annual orientation class to the Lord's Supper. We join millions of followers of Jesus in every time zone partaking the bread and wine this morning, remembering Jesus.

I got to thinking yesterday about my memory of World Communion as a child. What sticks out in my mind is the image of endless gatherings of people in endless kinds of churches taking communion pretty much the way we took it in our family church back in Pittsburgh – a slight but understandable flaw in my thinking.

My child's memory had a feeling of solidarity, of a huge family of people somehow related because we all believed in Jesus and believed in God. But I am afraid that's where my memory ends – millions of people sitting in their pews in thousands of churches around the world eating little cubes of Wonder Bread and sipping Welch's grape juice from little cups.

I know now that that childhood view is incomplete. Only half finished. Because you see it is not appropriate to isolate this Holy Supper – as if it was an end in itself, as if those who come to this banquet for the soul come just to be satisfied then go home.

If this supper means anything, if it amounts to anything, if we let God have God's way and get out of the way, as I heard one of my clergy friends say recently, if we get out of the way of the Holy Spirit, then what happens when you and I leave this sanctuary after communion is the real story today.

In other words, we don't come here to just remember Jesus then go home with full tummies to take a nap. We come here to remember Jesus and have our lives changed, our world turned around, our communities transformed and made new.

Turn to the Book of Hebrews. This is surely what the writer was saying when he presented that glorious vision we heard Gretchen read of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. Jesus through whom the worlds were made and who is above all angels and powers.

This is the same Jesus about whom we have stories of helping people, befriending the people no one seemed to care much about: poor, sick, imprisoned people.

Then Hebrews adds this, Hebrews says when creation comes to a conclusion...some distant day we know not when...when history ends we see Jesus bringing all who are lost, forgotten, and broken to wholeness and healing. A great company of healed, faithful people, together for all time.

You see, Hebrews gives us the end of the story before the story ends. Reading Hebrews is like reading the last chapter first then working your way through the book.

This vision is no more debatable than the religious poems of Wallace Stevens. They just are. The vision of the end of time and salvation for all people just is.

What I mean by positive thinking in the sermon title today is not the kind of positive thinking Norman Vincent Peale or Robert Schuller talk about. That kind of positive thinking is about the indomitable human spirit. Believe hard enough it will come true.

No. The kind of positive thinking I am talking about today is the kind that knows the end of the story before the story ends and is therefore able to face any circumstance with confidence and hope. It is about the indomitable Spirit of God.

The whole point of knowing the end of the story is to help us get through those chapters of life where it looks like we are headed for a disastrous ending. A broken relationship. A terminal illness. Buffalo's fiscal crisis. Situations where if you were a betting person you would say forget it. Nothing good is going to come out of this.

I heard the story the other day of a pastoral counselor who specializes in the treatment of addictive disorders. This counselor himself climbed out of the ravages of alcoholism, two addictive parents, a wild, wasted youth, to live a life of service to others.

What he said was this, "I have come at last to stop saying when something comes my way in life, 'this is good,' or 'this is bad.' God has taught me not to be so quick to label life as a curse or a blessing. I have to wait to see what good God will make of it before I render a verdict. Because sometimes, those things that I first thought to be negative have, in the hands of a good God, turned out positive. Even the worst 'no' turned out to be God's gracious 'yes.'<sup>1</sup>

I like what that man says because it means whenever we find ourselves in a tough spot instead of running to take cover or pulling back and calling it quits we can remain open. We know God can bring something good out of something bad. We know God can bring life out of death and so we stay positive instead of paralyzed when life throws us a heap of trouble.

You could see this kind of living in our Greek Orthodox brothers and sisters just two blocks north on Delaware Avenue this World Communion. Maybe you remember how they acted with grace and calm after the fire that destroyed their sanctuary two years ago.

They were amazing. Father Jim Dukas and many I spoke to in that church were saddened yes, disturbed to be sure, but somehow serene in the midst of the storm – dealing with a young boy in their congregation who was the arsonist and the backbreaking task of rebuilding. If you haven't seen that new sanctuary go see it.

God brought something good out of something bad.

Or, I share with you today a letter I received from Doug Belden – a son of this congregation who now lives in California with his family. His son – a grade school youngster – will undergo very delicate, serious surgery for his cancer this week.

The father, Doug, writes this, he writes, "As the day approaches, Byrne, his sister and we his parents are obviously nervous, but our faith in a positive outcome is strong. We are confident that what needs to happen will happen and we will all be stronger and closer as a result. I know many of you have been praying for Byrne and for all of us and we thank you for that."

That's the power of positive thinking in action.

What I am saying is that because we know the end of the story, because we see Jesus at the end of time reigning over all who have been healed and made whole – which includes you and me, because of this we live positively, bravely, boldly.

For we see Jesus, as the writer of Hebrews says, and all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.

Remembering Jesus this way in the bread and wine makes all the difference in what you do when you leave worship today.

The payoff of positive thinking is that it allows you and me to keep our feet put when the world around us seems to be caving in and trouble is all around.

Tribulation for the believer does not invite haste, it invites contemplation, reflection, perseverance, endurance. It invites careful strategy and action. Brave advocacy and support.

The payoff of positive thinking is that it opens us up so that God can breath hope into our lives and use us to bring about hope for the oppressed, release to the captive and joy to those who live in despair.

The real story today, World Communion Sunday, won't be written until you and I leave here and face some inner turmoil or community injustice.

St. Paul said, “we are handicapped on all sides but we are never frustrated. We are puzzled but never in despair. We are persecuted but we never have to stand alone, we may be knocked down but we are never knocked out.”

That's the message I'd like our first and second graders to learn over time from all of us as they participate in the Holy Supper, then watch us go into the world to live and serve. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William Willimon, Pulpit Resource10-12/03 pg. 7.