



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

## Part of our World

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 13, 2022*

*Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany*

*Based on Jeremiah 17:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26*

*God of blessing and woe,  
disturbing the deadly order of the world:  
Give us faith tested in poverty,  
hunger for what really satisfies,  
eyes softened by tears  
and hearts ready to laugh  
at all that is false and pompous  
that we might be witnesses  
to the dignity of life  
through Jesus Christ, who turns the world upside down.  
Amen.<sup>1</sup>*

On one morning earlier this week, just after my alarm clock went off, I was mindlessly scrolling through my social media feeds and trying to convince myself to get out of bed, when I happened upon a news story about a British royal testing positive for COVID-19. Because—like many Episcopal priests and other tabloid readers—I have a peculiar and indefensible fascination with the British royal family, I stopped my scrolling to read the full post. And then, still reluctant to emerge from the comfort of my warm bed, I made a classic mistake: I also read the comments. It was in those comments that I spotted an urgent plea from one of my fellow Facebook users, addressed to the journalism outfit that had posted the story: “Stop reporting stuff about Covid,” she demanded, “for the love of God. There [are] so many positive awesome stories you can be reporting on! Stop the doom and gloom and stop getting so excited to report this stuff. Get back to real journalism.”<sup>2</sup>

I can't say that the contraction of COVID-19 by a single fully vaccinated and boosted individual was the most newsworthy story of the day, but I was nonetheless struck by the commenter's implied definition of “real journalism.” “Real” journalism, she suggested, was positive, awesome, upbeat. It was selective in its approach. It refused to traffic in doom and gloom. It did not concern itself with the truth.

Look on the bright side. Say no to negativity. Stop complaining. Be grateful. Stay positive. Despite the fact that tragedy and frustration are inevitable aspects of human life, Americans have long pressured one another to refrain from criticism, to renounce sad feelings, and to find a way to be cheerful no matter what. In 1952, Norman Vincent Peale of Manhattan's Marble Collegiate Church famously

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, Steven. *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*. Church Publishing, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/nytimes/posts/10152869859304999>

published *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which achieved enormous popularity by encouraging readers to leave negativity behind and to relentlessly pursue happiness and success.

Peale's legacy tenaciously persists both in secular self-help discourse and in American Christianity. Bestselling books continue to promise us that we will achieve everything we want if only we think positive thoughts, while scores of American Christians, particularly those who adhere to the so-called prosperity gospel, eschew negative emotions and insist on "good vibes only" as a matter of faith.

Several years ago, Duke professor Kate Bowler was visiting Houston, Texas, during Holy Week. Curious about how evangelical megachurches observed Good Friday, she called several of them to find out when services would take place. Bowler was surprised to discover that most of the megachurches were not holding any Good Friday services whatsoever. Apparently, the negativity of Jesus' crucifixion—the sadness and fear involved in contemplating Christ dead upon the cross—was too much for them to stomach. One church receptionist told Bowler that she had no idea what "Good Friday" meant; others told Bowler to visit their church on Easter, when Jesus was risen and there was a reason to celebrate.

The only megachurch in Houston that held a Good Friday service the year that Bowler visited was Lakewood Church, often considered to be one of the largest churches in the country. But the Good Friday service at Lakewood was quite unlike the Mennonite Good Friday services of Bowler's youth. Before even parking her car at Lakewood, Bowler was welcomed by the parking lot attendant with the cheery greeting of "Happy Good Friday!" By the time she took a seat in the sanctuary, Bowler had been wished a "Happy Good Friday!" at least six times. Even as they remembered how Jesus died—even as they recalled what was arguably the worst moment in Christian history—the members of Lakewood Church couldn't manage to be sad.<sup>3</sup>

It's no accident that the pastor of Lakewood Church, Joel Osteen, is the author of the recent book *Empty Out the Negative: Make Room for Joy, Greater Confidence, and New Levels of Influence*. Joel Osteen, also the author of *Your Best Life Now*, long ago took up the mantle of Norman Vincent Peale. "It's easy to go through life holding on to things that weigh us down," Osteen writes, "guilt, resentment, doubt, worry. The problem is, when we allow these negative emotions in, they take up space we need for the good things that should be there. Imagine your life is a container. You were created to be filled with joy, peace, confidence, and creativity. But if you allow worry in, it pushes out the peace. There's not space for both."

Nestled between Norman Vincent Peale and Joel Osteen in the history of the American prosperity gospel is the Reverend Doctor Robert Schuller, of Crystal Cathedral and *Hour of Power* fame. Schuller's 1985 book *The Be Happy Attitudes* sees Jesus' eight proclamations of blessing in the Sermon on the Mount, sayings such as "Blessed are the poor in spirit" and "Blessed are those who mourn," as guides to happy living. The Beatitudes, Schuller claims, are "eight spiritual laws, taught and lived out by Christ, that will help you realign and readjust your attitude... For over two thousand years, they have transformed the minds, the moods, the manners of men and women." They have "proven unsurpassed as successful therapy to depressed minds."

But while Schuller sees the Beatitudes as an injunction to change one's attitude and view one's life in positive terms, suggesting that only those who become happy will experience God's blessing, the Beatitudes themselves declare that the unhappy are in fact the ones who have been blessed. Those who are grieving the death of a loved one, those who are suffering under the specter of persecution,

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Bowler tells this story in two of her books, first in *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* and then in *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*.

those who are decidedly unsatisfied with the state of society—who eagerly desire more justice in the world—God already looks lovingly on them.

God's preference for the unhappy and the dissatisfied becomes even more obvious in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, which Schuller conveniently doesn't mention in his book. Luke's lesser-known take on the Beatitudes, decreed not on a mountain but on a plain, is far more bracing than what we read in Matthew. While Matthew's Jesus speaks in abstractions such as, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Luke's Jesus speaks more plainly: "Blessed are you who are poor." While Matthew's Jesus offers a blessing for those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness," Luke's Jesus focuses on those whose hunger is immediate and material: "Blessed are you who are hungry now." While Matthew's Jesus shows a somewhat general concern for those who mourn, Luke's Jesus paints a more vivid picture: "Blessed are you who weep."

Most strikingly, Luke's Jesus includes a set of "woe" statements that correspond to his statements of blessing: "Woe to you who are rich," "Woe to you who are full now," "Woe to you who are laughing now," "Woe to you when all speak well of you." These pronouncements demonstrate definitively that happiness and success should not be the ultimate goals of a Christian life. To the contrary, Jesus makes clear, striving for contentment is futile. The satisfaction of the rich, the well-fed, the joyful, and the popular is temporary. It will not last.

In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus himself declines to be the happy and contented one. He takes on the role of a critic, expressing deep dissatisfaction, even anger, with specific groups of people and, in general, with the way things are. If we actually wanted to empty out the negative from our lives, if we truly felt the need to cut out all that is not positive, we would have to start by turning to our Bibles and taking our scissors to the words of the Savior in whom we claim to believe.

There's been a lot of commentary in recent years about something called toxic positivity. It's a term that refers to the tendency some people have to relentlessly insist on positive thinking in even the worst of circumstances. Though a reasonable amount of optimism can be helpful in many situations, an overdose of positivity may minimize the real suffering that individuals who are in pain face. "Forced positivity," Harvard psychologist Susan David writes, "is a form of denial. When you tell someone to 'just be positive,' you're basically saying to them, 'my comfort is more important than your reality.'"<sup>4</sup> Think about how someone who just lost a job might feel if you advised them to stop being so negative because they'll probably get another one. Think about how someone with a cancer diagnosis might respond if you told them not to despair because it's possible that they will live. Consider how a victim of racism, sexism or transphobia might react if you ordered them to stop complaining because things are so much better now than they used to be.

By accepting a certain degree of negativity in others and in ourselves, we promote honesty, foster emotional health, and create opportunities for beneficial change. We also practice our Christianity. The apostle Paul reminds us that "if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."<sup>5</sup> Our heroes in the faith, the letter to the Hebrews tells us, were strangers and foreigners on the earth. They were not satisfied with everything this home had to offer. They desired a better country, a heavenly one.<sup>6</sup> Christianity is a religion that looks forward—to the future, to new life and new possibilities. Too much contentment in the present may prevent us from embracing what is on the horizon ahead. Christians should be a little cranky and cantankerous; we should exhibit some sadness, some anger, and some concern; we should mope and worry and whine and complain. After all, we

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<sup>4</sup> [https://twitter.com/susandavid\\_phd/status/1334530443203534856](https://twitter.com/susandavid_phd/status/1334530443203534856).

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:19.

<sup>6</sup> See Hebrews 11:13-16.

aren't supposed to be ok with the way things are. We are meant to turn with longing towards all that is to come.

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022