

THE GREAT POSITIVE POSSIBILITY

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Grace Church in New York
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Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep ... the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. (from Romans 13)

What a joy it is to be back in our beautiful church. But it would be rude of me to lift up my eyes and admire the beautifully restored ceiling without acknowledging all the people who made it possible: the generous givers who blew the lid off the capital campaign, the construction crews who worked late into many a summer night, the people behind the scenes who kept the project moving along on budget and on time, and the army of parishioners yesterday who put the pews back in order. Thanks to many people we were able to compress a huge amount of work into a relatively short span of time. The end result is a ceiling that not only looks good, but is good. In fact, through the complex process of plaster consolidation, the ceiling is better than new. I would be stretching St. Paul's words to say that we have put on the armor of light, but the ceiling is stronger today than it was when the church first opened.

Consider this: apart from today, only one other time has a congregation gathered in this Grace Church under a perfectly pristine ceiling. The date was March 7, 1846, the day the building was consecrated. Various local newspapers described the occasion. It was a ticketed event for pew holders first, and the interested public second. *The Herald* reported: *The Church was filled with one of the most beautiful and fashionable congregations we ever saw gathered together. Youth, elegance and jewelry were combined, and the colored light, showing through the stained glass windows, made the coup d'oeil rich in the extreme. The church is very showy but lacks in an appearance of stability.*¹

The Rector of Grace Church was a man named Thomas House Taylor, and in his sermon he decided to transform the consecration service into a moment of great positive possibility. Taylor was concerned for the waves of immigrants arriving in New York City who could scarcely afford to rent a tenement to say nothing of purchasing a pew. So he challenged the beautiful and fashionable congregation that day: *to give me the means of building, and preparing for the most efficient and most immediate operation, Grace Church Chapel, a church in which the Word and Sacraments shall be administered according to our forms, and the sittings will be free to all.* Imagine, they had just spent three years building a church, but suddenly the call was to build another. Guess what? They did it. In fact, the people of Grace Church built four Grace Chapels over the next fifty years. The new church was to be a springboard into greater service of God and humanity. It was to be an engine of great positive possibility.

That phrase – the great positive possibility – isn't mine, in case you were wondering. It comes from a commentary on the Book of Romans by Karl Barth,² and it's how he describes the portion of the passage of St. Paul's letter we heard a moment ago. Paul wrote: *Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.* What Paul

¹ Newspaper quotes about the consecration service are taken from Grace Church and Old New York, by William Rhinelanders Stewart. E.P. Dutton & Company, 1924.

² Barth, Karl, The Epistle to the Romans. Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 492.

means is that because of the resurrection of Jesus, great positive possibilities are opened to us. A new day has dawned for all of creation. Two-thousand years on we have hardly reached high noon; in fact, only the early streaks of light are beginning to pierce the night. Nevertheless, even though much of the world still seems to dwell in the shadows of evil and sin, the power of darkness and death is broken. It's time to wake from sleep. *Let us then cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*

Whenever I hear these words of St. Paul I think of Advent. As you know, Advent is that short season of the church year leading up to Christmas. In Advent we're told that the time is short. Time is running out before Christmas. Time is running out before the coming of the Lord. Time is running out on the days of this mortal life. Therefore, the urgent summons in this portion of Paul's letter to the Romans is to compress a huge amount of work into whatever short span of time it is that remains to us. What is it that we are supposed to be doing? St. Paul makes it very plain: *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."* In his commentary on Romans, Karl Barth wrote that to love one another is "a protest against the course of this world." Are you unhappy with the way the world is going these days? Then love your neighbor as yourself in protest against the lingering darkness. Love is the great positive possibility.

It sounds simple, doesn't it? The problem is, it doesn't take long before you encounter what Barth calls "the riddle of the neighbor." The riddle of the neighbor is this: some people whom you try to love seem strangely unreceptive to the hand you extend. Even in church love can falter. If you read between the lines of today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew, you will detect a church in conflict, where quarreling, envious members sinned against one another.

Then hear this. When the *Evening Post* wrote about the consecration of Grace Church, they told of a woman who secured a proper ticket, arrived early, and found a seat. She had scarcely sat down, however, *when she was accosted by another lady who said the seat belonged to her.* The woman moved to another pew, only to be *very rudely addressed by a man who said that the pew was his, and he wanted it for his own use.* Alas, the *Evening Post* reported that the woman did not risk a third attempt to find a seat. Instead, she simply left the building, where she probably fell victim to one of the many pick-pockets reported to be working the crowd outside the church. So much for the great positive possibility with this neighbor. It's a parable for how it often unfolds when love of neighbor gets difficult. People in conflict often just go their separate ways and vanish. What we take from our failed encounters with each other is the unresolved feeling that we are leaving undone the primary thing we ought to do in this life: love one another.

Cast away the works of darkness. Put on the armor of light. Love your neighbor as yourself. Is anyone beginning to worry that we will run out of time? I have good news for you. It's not Advent. Not yet. If the going has been difficult, you still have time. You have 104 shopping days until Christmas. You can hear these Advent words, take a deep breath, and go to work on the things you've left undone that you ought to have done. Do you need to reconcile with a neighbor or a family member? Take the time, because you have it. Note the orderly, even painfully slow process we find outlined in today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew (18:15-20). *"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."* In other words, if Person A has a problem with Person B, Person A should go directly and privately to Person B, instead of talking it up with Persons C, D, E, F, and G. If a low-level, face-to-face meeting fails to bring about reconciliation, only then should more people be involved. Try to avoid escalation, and work diligently to mend the broken relationship. Take the time. The moment of the great positive possibility can be any moment, even now. Now is the time to wake from sleep.

What is the end result of pressing on with the great positive possibility? It is nothing short of the presence of Jesus. What Matthew meant to convey is the active, loving presence of the living Jesus. What Jesus meant to impart is the promise that we can know and connect with the presence of God. How do we experience the presence of God? To be sure, people discern the presence of God in numerous ways: in nature, through the sacraments, in music and worship, through art and beauty. But what we hear today is the sure promise of Jesus that by connecting deeply with our neighbors, even loving them as ourselves, we say yes to the possibility of connecting with God. Jesus said, *“For where two are or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”*

How about us? As we return to our restored church and gather under this pristine ceiling, what specifically might the great positive possibility for us? You might be thinking that nice though the ceiling is, some of the walls are still looking a bit shabby. How about the walls? Indeed, some day I will probably channel Thomas House Taylor and say “give me the means of building and repairing these walls.” Alas, restoring the south aisle walls will be another project for another summer. In the meantime, I believe the spirit of Thomas House Taylor and the Spirit of God would call us at this moment to do otherwise. I believe our calling is to use the current restoration as a springboard for greater service to God and humanity. The great positive possibility for us involves seeking the face of Christ in the wider community.

Throughout this past year, as we devoted much of our attention and resources to restoring our own house, I think it’s been an important witness to the world that we’ve worked incredibly hard to restore someone else’s house as well. I refer, of course, to our partnership with Habitat for Humanity – the House that Grace Built. Let it be known that these two projects ran parallel with each other. Now our ceiling is restored, and this fall the house we’ve been renovating in the St. Alban’s neighborhood of Queens will be finished as well. Our hope is that a family will be living in it by Christmas. What comes next? It’s no secret that we live in a troubled world, more dangerous than it’s been in over a generation. What can one church do? Well, our protest against the course of the world can be a renewed effort to love our neighbors as ourselves. Already we are in conversation with Habitat about taking on another house. But this time we would do so intentionally with another congregation, a congregation very different from ourselves.

I am not talking about making nice with the Methodists, difficult though they can be. No, I am not talking about the Methodists or the Mennonites. I am talking about the Muslims. The idea is to adopt a Habitat for Humanity house with a Muslim congregation, and work on it together side by side, shoulder to shoulder, as children of God and citizens of this country. The great positive possibility is that we might make a meaningful witness to the world, and even discover the Spirit of the living God in the face of a stranger.

Owe no one anything but to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep ... the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.