

Let's Make Optimism Cool Again
Rev. Dave Dunn – UUMAN 12/3/17

Do you say no more often than you say yes?

When faced with a problem are you more likely to say “this is simply too big for us to solve” or might you say “let’s find a way to begin to solve this”?

Are you more likely to say “we need to follow the process” or might you say “let’s look for a new way”?

When we lack the money for something we need, are you more likely to say “but we don’t have the money” or might you say “let’s find a way to get the money”?

If you had to describe your outlook on life would you say that it is based on a “culture of scarcity” or on a “culture of abundance”?

In an op-ed piece published last year in the New York Times, author Greg Easterbrook, wrote:

Though candidates on the right are full of fire and brimstone this year, the trend away from optimism is most pronounced among liberals. A century ago Progressives were the optimists, believing society could be improved, while conservatism saw the end-times approaching. Today progressive thought embraces Judgment Day too. Climate change, inequality and racial tension are viewed not as the next round of problems to be solved, but as proof that the United states is horrible...The lack of optimism in contemporary liberal and centrist thinking opens the door to...demagogy....And because optimism has lost its standing in American public opinion, past reforms - among them environmental protection, anti-discrimination initiatives, income security for seniors, auto and aviation safety...and yes, Obamacare - don't get credit for the good they have accomplished.

(Greg Easterbrook, "When Did Optimism Become Uncool?" New York Times, May 12, 2016)

This was written prior to the November general election. Now, the Democratic Party is in a struggle with itself to uncover its own identity. Do they want to move to the middle and appeal to Democrats and disaffected Republicans who are appalled with the current President? Do they want to make a hard tack to the left and repudiate everything for which the President and Republicans stand?

Interestingly, amongst the craziness of this Presidency and the candidacy of Roy Moore for US Senate in Alabama, even Republicans are struggling with their identity. Where do they fall on the center- right continuum?

However, maybe these questions focus on the wrong aspect of Democratic or Republican identity. Maybe it's not about where either of them fall on the left-right spectrum. Maybe the identity lies in the message itself.

Instead of embracing "Judgement Day" and a culture of scarcity, might the time be ripe to infuse into the mix an optimistic breath of fresh air and embrace a culture of abundance? Of course, there are difficult problems to solve that will demand hard work, but can you imagine what we could do if we began to operate from a culture of abundance?

How can we look at things optimistically? Let's look at some facts...true facts.

Let's talk about the environment and climate change. There are many threads to discuss when talking about the environment and I can't honor them all in a portion of a sermon, but let me show you this.

Here is a picture of my hometown, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, in the 1950s.



If you can't see this photo clearly from your seat and all you see is what looks like a smudge of blackened ash, then you are seeing it clearly! This photo was taken at midday in the 1950s. Today, it is unacceptable to have that level of air pollution in an American city; and thankfully Pittsburgh no longer looks like this.

Now I only have data through 2013 but despite ever increasing demand and production of electricity in the US, and with more and more automobiles clogging our highways and byways, CO2 greenhouse gas emission rates are now at a 20 year low.

Did you know that? Why aren't we celebrating this?

Coal production in the United States is down 39% since its peak in 1978. Yes, it means fewer coal jobs and the demagoguery of the pessimists play off of that; but the fact of the matter is that the jobs were disappearing anyway due to automation. That also is an established fact.

Coal is a complete environmental mess from start to finish...from mining it to burning it or gasifying it to cleaning up its aftermath.

Reducing coal production by 39% is a loving gift to the earth!

Why aren't we celebrating this?

The water issues in Flint, MI are appalling. Yet, Flint is an outlier when looking at all the data. Sure, improvements to water quality can and should be made everywhere yet we generally feel confident that we can travel anywhere in the United States, turn on any public tap and expect, and usually get, clean water. Even from our great new water fountain. Yes!

And the idea that you can fly anywhere in the United States from any of our hundreds of airports on any of the thousands of flights each day and expect to get to your destination safely is a true technological and engineering marvel. The success rate isn't simply 99%, that would mean dozens of plane crashes every day. The success rate is like 99.9999%. This is cause for celebration.

I could go on with many additional true facts that are cause for optimism.

How many of you watched 60 Minutes last week?

One of the 60 Minutes segments last week told the story of Chef Jose Andres – a well-known chef in New York who ventured to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria with a team folks, some money and little else. The goal was to provide hot meals to the people of Puerto Rico yet there was no plan, no infrastructure, no committees - nothing.

People were waiting for the government and FEMA to get things going yet during this time millions of people needed food to eat. Millions of people.... A daunting task.... A problem too big for Chef Andres' small team.

When he got there he said that “everybody was saying ‘there’s no food, there’s no food.’ “

Without going through any agency, without asking permission, without getting the necessary clearances they found a kitchen they could use, bought some ingredients and food (there was plenty of food available) and they simply began to cook.

They made 1000 meals on that first day. A good start but a drop in the bucket in the overall scheme of things. But if you watched the segment last week, you could almost feel Chef Andres’s energy and optimism. He was making it fun. They were singing together while they cooked. Despite horrible conditions, (e.g. no air conditioning, and electricity likely supplied by generators) and likely no other basic resources, they remained optimistic and kept at it, pumping out hot food for people to eat.

People were watching. More and more of them started to get involved in what Chef Andres was doing. The team got access to more pots and pans, additional kitchens and more volunteer cooks came on board. An organic movement began to grow. They were making it up as they went - because they had to. People were hungry. There wasn’t any time for committees and 10-point plans. There was a sense of urgency in what they were doing yet all the while they were keeping it fun.

Copycat kitchens were springing up all around. A pastor whose church started a copycat kitchen said, “we have people here with no water and no lights....they’ve stopped thinking about that and are helping others.”

This reminds me of hymn 1027 that says:

When the poor ones, who have nothing, are still giving
When the thirsty, pass the cup, water to share
When the wounded, offer others, strength and healing
We see God, here by our side, walking our way
We see God, here by our side, walking our way (Martin Selz)

For me, a particularly beautiful part of the segment focused on a woman whose job it was to simply pour some oil into each pan of rice prior to cooking. That's all she was charged to do. Yet she took it upon herself to also say a brief prayer, just a few words, as she poured the oil into each pan. "Dios bendiga Puerto Rico." God bless Puerto Rico." Imagine that – all those prayers; thousands of prayers said.

But this particular scene resonated with me on another level. In Hebrew, the word *mashiach* means messiah - anointed one. When one is anointed, they have oil placed on their forehead. In Greek, the word is *Christos*. Anointed one. Jesus Christos. Christians call Jesus the anointed one. *Mashiach*.

So here is this lovely woman, not only saying a prayer over each pan of food but she's also actually pouring the anointing oil onto the food. She is anointing each pan of food as the *mashiach* - the Messiah, Christos; the Redeemer in the form of food for a hungry people. Beautiful!!!

Chef Andres' seems to know that people inherently want to give, they inherently want to participate in abundance. Their movement has now served over three million hot meals to the people of Puerto Rico. And when people see such optimism, joy and abundance amongst dreadful circumstances, they will say again and again, "I want to be a part of that. I want some of that."

Chef Andres' optimism allows him to choose, and I believe it is a choice, to see and operate from a culture of abundance. "I want some of that. "

"I'll have what she's having," to quote a famous line from a movie.

The point of this sermon however is not about suggesting that we turn towards an optimistic culture of abundance as a political strategy (by either party), or as a way to celebrate environmental progress or technological marvels. This sermon is not about Puerto Rico.

This sermon is about us. This sermon is about UUMAN. How do we operate? What is our culture here? How do we choose to look at our mission, ministry and governance at UUMAN? Do we look at it through the doom and gloom lenses of scarcity or through the more optimistic lenses of abundance?

I must say, at times, there has been evidence of a culture of scarcity here at UUMAN.

At times, we

... say no more often than we say yes

... see problems as generally too big to solve

... believe that the only process to use is the process we've always used

... think that we don't have the money

... choose to see a culture of scarcity

But I've also seen real evidence of a culture of abundance. Actually, a lot of it.

Who here has been to Food Truck Fridays? One evening a month, over the past three or four months, food trucks have been parked here at UUMAN serving food to the public. Food Truck Fridays will start again in the spring but at the one held in November, we not only had food, but we had a pie contest! What fun!!! The evening had such a fun multigenerational community vibe to it. On that evening we also had a family ministry covenant group and the board hosted a listening session. At other Food Truck Fridays there have been movies and other activities. I could envision a music jam and game night also taking place. Who knows what else? "I want some of that!" Food Truck Fridays is the brainchild of one of our newer members, Sally Mullikin. I want to thank her for coming up with this idea. (And the idea of the pie contest!) I want to celebrate this. This is simply the evidence of the wonderful blooming of a culture of abundance.

Who here went to the IRC Thanksgiving dinner a couple of weeks ago? I wasn't able to go this year but I went last year. What a wonderful event! UUMAN and the Hamza Masjid together prepared a Thanksgiving dinner that was enjoyed by hundreds of refugees from around the world. The atmosphere was palpably joyful; palpably abundant. There was music. There were games being played. There was rich multigenerational, multicultural conversation. You could feel the love and energy that filled the giant high school gymnasium. I didn't want to leave. I want to celebrate this. This is evidence of a culture of abundance.

Last May, as the church year and many of its activities and initiatives were winding down, Sheila Smith took it upon herself to lead a brand new adult enrichment course "A Call to Faith in Turbulent Times." I don't recall her asking for permission to do this. I don't recall her asking whether there was a process that must be followed in order for something like this to happen. No...she, on her own, simply created a space in which she could lead a course that proved to be valuable to many of our members. I want to celebrate this. This is evidence of a culture of abundance.

Dave Hudson just wrapped up a Sunday evening curriculum called "Being Peace." A new curriculum based on a Pema Chodron book will begin in January. Again, I don't recall him asking permission or checking with the "usual suspects" prior to undertaking this. I want to celebrate this . This is evidence of a culture of abundance.

We have a group of congregants here at UUMAN who are doing the difficult justice work of environmental legislative advocacy. They've partnered with the Citizens Climate Lobby and last spring I was confronted...ok, I wasn't confronted, that would be stretching the truth....I was asked nicely, as the minister of UUMAN, to sign their environmental platform. I enthusiastically did. I want to celebrate this. This is evidence of a culture of abundance.

A new "Race Conscious Families" group is being started here at UUMAN. It is also open to those outside of UUMAN. They seek to explore issues of race and how it affects our family and social fabric. Also being started here is an LBGT friendly youth group which will also be open to those

outside of UUMAN. Because those starting these groups understand that their efforts are consistent with our mission, they're empowered to undertake this as they see fit. I want to celebrate this. This is evidence of a culture of abundance.

When you fill out your annual pledge card to UUMAN - when you're actually filling it out; how do you feel? Do you fill it out grudgingly? Does it feel like a necessary evil? Or, as you fill it out do you nod your head and say "Yes, I want some more of that!" I do! I hope you come to feel that way about UUMAN.

Together, let's make optimism cool again. There is no need to create it, simply bring it with you. Let's choose to see the abundance that surrounds and envelops us. It's already here – waiting for us; waiting for you.