

“Bad Hair Day,” August 2, 2009

You may have heard the story about the woman who was at her hairdresser’s getting her hair styled for an upcoming trip to Rome. She happened to mention the trip to her hairdresser, who responded: “Rome? Why would anyone want to go there? It’s crowded and dirty... You’re crazy to go to Rome!”

“So, what airline are you flying?” he asked. “Continental,” was her response. “We got a great rate!” “Continental?” exclaimed the hairdresser. “That’s a terrible airline. Their planes are old, and they’re always late. You’ll be sorry for taking Continental.”

His next question was, “Where are you staying in Rome?” “We’ll be at this exclusive little place over on Rome’s Tiber River.” “Don’t go any further,” he hairdresser interrupted. “Everybody thinks it’s going to be something special and exclusive, but it will turn out to be a dump. I guarantee you of that!”

Trying to thwart off his negativity, the client tried adding another feature of the trip. “We’re going to go to see the Vatican and maybe get to see the Pope.” “That’s a good one,” laughed the hairdresser. “You and a million other people. He’ll be the size of an ant, if you see him at all! All I can say is ‘Good luck. I promise you this is going to be a lousy trip!’”

A month later, the woman again came in for a haircut. The hairdresser asked her about her trip. “It was absolutely wonderful,” she exclaimed. “Not only were we on one of Continental’s brand new planes, but we got bumped up to first class, and the plane arrived early!”

“And,” she continued, “the hotel was great! They had just completed a \$5 million remodeling job, and now it’s one of the finest hotels in the city.

“Well,” muttered the hairdresser, “that’s all well and good, but I’m sure you didn’t get to see the Pope.” “Actually, we were quite lucky, because as we toured the Vatican, a Swiss Guard tapped me on the shoulder, and explained that the Pope likes to meet some of the visitors, and if I would just step into his private room and wait, the Pope would greet us there.”

“Sure enough,” she continued, “Five minutes later the Pope walked through the door and shook my hand” I knelt down and he spoke a few words to me” “Really?” said the

hairdresser, “What did he say?” He said, “Who made such a mess of your hair?”

I’d call that hairdresser a bit of a pessimist. Wouldn’t you? What a contrast between the two of them! It reminds me of a one liner about optimists and pessimists that says, “An optimist believes we live in the best of all worlds; the pessimist fears this is true.”

Do you know anyone like that—people who are afraid this is as good as it gets, who are constantly “downers”? They tend to be like Winnie the Pooh’s donkey friend, Eeyore, always bringing people down just by their negative perspective; they complain, seem to wallow in self-pity and make mountains out of molehills. It seems that nothing is right in their eyes, and everything is wrong.

I suspect most of us have friends or acquaintances, perhaps even family members and co-workers who could fall into the category of “negative people.” We often don’t have a choice about whether we can be around them or not, and they seem to taint the air with their negativism, always whining about something, or sharing their latest catastrophe.

I don’t know how you are when you’re around negative people, but I tend to have a tough time. It seems that no matter how positive we try to stay, or how many positive “takes” we try to offer on any given situations, they are never sufficient. Frankly, it causes me not to want to spend a whole lot of time around folks like that, if for no other reason than my fear that I may become more and more negative, too! And it’s even more difficult if we have no choice when it comes to being around them.

As we talked when we viewed the Michael J. Fox documentary on optimistic and hopeful people, it all boils down to our attitudes. We cannot choose what happens to us in life, but we can choose our perspectives on what happens, and our attitudes make all the difference in the world! Clement Stone put it like this, “There is little difference in people, but that little difference makes a big difference. The little difference is attitude. The big difference is whether it is positive or negative.”

How do we foster a positive attitude? How do we deal with those who rain on our parade, who tend to see the down side of everything? How do we stay positive in the face of such negativism? What do we do if we’re aware that we tend to be a little negative ourselves?

Perhaps our Bible passage can be helpful in thinking about our own perspectives,

and how to deal with those who are more negative than we wish they were. It's the apostle Paul writing to the people in Ephesus, and here's how it reads: **"...There must be spiritual renewal of your thoughts and attitudes. You must display a new nature because you are a new person, created in God's likeness—righteous, holy and true."**

It seems pretty clear to me that Paul is trying to help us understand that we are the ones who choose how we will view the world and what happens in it, and that is tied very closely to our faith, and to our connection and relationship with God. Coming closer to God and knowing God's love in the depths of our hearts changes the way we see other people and life's events. That's the "spiritual renewal of our thoughts and attitudes" that Paul talks about.

I've often said that letting God's love into our hearts means we look at the world through a new set of eyes; we are more prone to look around us with eyes of compassion and care, rather than being short-tempered and irritable. Having a heart filled with love can help us be more patient and more loving toward some of the negative people in our lives. In fact, the Dalai Lama said it like this: **"One can overcome the forces of negative emotions, like anger and hatred, by cultivating their counterforces, like love and compassion."** God's love can fill us with the love and compassion we need to overcome the negativism of those around us.

That's a step in the right direction for keeping ourselves more positive, and for seeing others with more compassion. It helps us realize that there may be reasons a person has such a negative outlook, reasons we don't or can't know. We aren't in their skins; we don't live in their homes; we don't know their life stories. That, in and of itself, is reason for more patience and compassion.

The simple fact is that every one of us is going to have to face those who are negative and who tend to bring us down. What can we do about that? What are loving, faithful ways to deal with them?

Let's suppose we're talking about family members or friends. One of the best ways to deal with their negativism is by limiting the time we spend with them. It's clear that if it's a close family member or a co-worker, we haven't as much choice about our time, but we can still impose some boundaries for ourselves, determining when and how much time is workable, and then living within our time limits.

We can also decide how we're going to deal with those who are close to us when they become negative. Can we just listen to them, and not try to solve or resolve their problem? Sometimes it helps the complainer just to be heard. At the same time, our negative "take" on some circumstance may be a little like some of our fears—when they're exposed to the light of day, they don't seem so ominous and foreboding. Just sharing them with someone who's willing to listen may be all that's needed.

However, if that doesn't seem sufficient, we might try asking some open-ended questions that help them process their complaints. For instance, we might ask, "Why do you say that?" Or, "What causes you to feel that way? Can you explain it to me?" It might help them consider their situation in a different light if they try to articulate their dilemma, and hearing them out might also give us an opportunity to reframe their issues in a more positive way.

We also need to realize that negativism may be a sign of depression or frozen anger, and most people need professional help to deal with that. We need to learn to recognize the danger signals and assist a friend or family member in getting the help they need.

Those of us who are trying to help those who are negative need to do our best to take care of ourselves. We do that by keeping the conversations on a positive note. That means we have to keep reminding ourselves of the positives in our own lives, of the blessings that all of us have. We have to separate ourselves emotionally from the negativism....not necessarily from the person, but from the negative attitude the person has, and try to be more compassionate. In a sense, we have to stay unplugged from their negative energy.

Probably the most important thing we can do, both to keep ourselves positive and to help those who tend to be negative is to fill our lives with prayer. If we begin and end each day with a prayer of gratitude for all our blessings and seek patience and compassion, I suspect our day will go much better and our night's rest will be much more peaceful, and we'll see and hear much less negativity.

Victor Hugo put it like this: **"Certain thoughts are prayers. There are moments when, whatever be the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees."** Whether it's a good day, or bad, sunny or rainy, life just might go a lot better for all of us if we made sure our soul is always on its knees.

Closing:

William James said it well when he wrote, "The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude." We can do that, you know? We can choose what our attitudes will be, and as we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that each of us has only positive attitudes. That's what God wants, too!

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.