

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“What Good is Goodness?”

A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

July 27, 2014

Galatians 5:22-23, Luke 10:25-37

I bring to our attention the word “goodness.” From Galatians, we understand it is one of the fruits of the Spirit. In the story from our lesson in the Gospel of Luke, the word “good” or “goodness” is not used. Yet this is a story we commonly refer to as the story of the *Good Samaritan*.

I believe that the word “goodness” has experienced a significant deflation in value in the last several decades. It usually starts out positively enough.

If a child is called a “good boy” or a “good girl” it typically means that they are behaving, that he or she stays out of trouble. Respect for authority within a well-ordered society is something that we value.

Yet such goodness may become mere compliance if we are not careful. Other values may be equally important and stand in tension with goodness so defined. Values like creativity, critical thinking, curiosity, compassion, justice.

Sometimes we use the term “good” to mean that something is acceptable. “Everything’s good,” we say.

“What is it good for?” is a question that raises the utilitarian issue. Is it useful or is it just for show?

Something that is good may mean it still retains its original purpose, that it's viable. The casserole dish is dropped on the floor, and after examining it for cracks, we declare, "It's good."

Those are some common meanings for the words good and goodness today. I also want to give you some examples that demonstrate the decline in the value of goodness.

You are in a store, looking at some tools. If you are like me, it's probably Home Depot or Lowe's, but it could be Sears.

Three sets of screwdrivers are offered. On the tag for each set is a one-word description: good, better, and best. The "best" set offers a lifetime tool exchange if anything becomes defective, no questions asked, even if you use the long-slotted screw driver as a crow bar.

At the other end of the spectrum is the set labeled "good." In contrast, the "good" set not only is cheaper, it looks like it might fall apart before you leave the store. The long-slotted screwdriver you wouldn't dare use to pry open the lid of a partially opened paint can. The merchandise choice is between good, better, and best. The good is the lowest quality offered. Is "good" good enough for you?

In 2001, Jim Collins published a blockbuster business management book about companies that excel to the highest levels in their industries. There are good companies, and then there are great companies.

Collins examined what distinguished these two types of businesses in his book *Good to Great*. The very first line of the book is quite provocative. Collins writes: "Good is the enemy of the great." Hmm.

The devaluation of the term good is not a recent phenomenon.

Are any of you coin collectors? For decades now, probably reaching back into the late 1800s, the numismatic world has graded coins on a descriptive or adjectival scale. One of the lower grades on that scale is called "good." If a coin is graded

“good,” it is so worn that little original detail remains; the coin is recognizable and that is about it.

Coins in more pristine condition will be rarer and of greater value. Who wants something that is worn down and is barely recognizable? We prefer the “extra fine” to that which is merely “good.”

A child once prayed this prayer: “God, make the bad people good, and the good people nice.” Goodness can develop a bad reputation. No one wants to be called a do-gooder.

Goodness is taking it on the chin. So how are we to understand this fruit of the Spirit named “goodness”?

The Gospel text from Luke is Jesus’ story that we refer to as the parable of the Good Samaritan. Instead of defining goodness as compliance with the Torah, Jesus tells this wonderful story. It is a story about goodness enacted by a stranger in the face of danger and prejudice and sacrifice.

We all know the parable. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was treacherous; bandits could easily hide and carry out an ambush on unsuspecting travelers. One such poor victim is left for dead. Ignored and disregarded by brothers in the faith, a hated foreigner befriends the man. Risking his own well-being by becoming involved, he cares for him, brings him to safety, and bears the expense of his convalescence.

Jesus called it being a neighbor—compassion motivated by a shared humanity rather than affinity based on a common faith or nationality, or attempting to placate a demanding God. People of faith identify it as goodness and call such a person a “good Samaritan.”

In another story, Luke tells about a rich young man who asks Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And before the man can continue, Jesus interrupts him: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Jesus identifies the good with God, and God only. When the rich young man turns

away full of sorrow, Jesus explains to his disciples that even the most righteous—the ones full of good deeds and the blessings of this life who are expected to make it into heaven—will find it impossible to do so. It is God’s work, not ours.

The Apostle Paul spoke of his own failure at being good. In chapter 7 of Romans, he admits, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (vv. 18-19).

That is why Paul speaks of the fruit of the Spirit. It is God working through Christ in us. It is not the fruit of our labor.

So goodness is not merely being good. Goodness is not compliance with moral laws or norms of society. Goodness is not some utilitarian concept that makes life better for all of us if only we would practice it.

The picture painted in scripture of goodness is vulnerability for the well-being of another. It demonstrates our common human ties as neighbors who need compassion and grace. Supremely it is exhibited in the love of God in Christ Jesus. His incarnation, his life and death and resurrection, are the very essence of goodness, the vulnerability of love for the well-being and healing of the world, for you and for me.

So how does goodness show up in our lives as we grow in Christ? I think it happens as we become real, as we grow in authenticity as human beings who are loved and who love. It happens as we slowly shed our reticence to being vulnerable and spend our lives for the benefit of others in response to Christ’s call.

Haven’t you seen that kind of goodness in the lives of others? I have.

- Husbands and wives who through long years have grown in love through trial and difficulty.
- Parents and children who sacrificially give to each other at the beginnings and endings of life.

- Comrades in arms who risk life for each other and the well-being of loved ones far away at home.
- Pursuers of peace and people of vision who refuse to allow present realities to dictate a declining future of our world.
- Communities of faith that see strangers as neighbors and bring hospitality and healing and the Good News of God's love to people near and far.

Of all these examples I've witnessed, none of them were perfect. Yet love bore the fruit of goodness in their lives.

William Martin in a chapter titled "Make the Ordinary Come Alive," writes the following advice to parents:

Do not ask your children to strive for extraordinary lives. Such striving may seem admirable, but it is a way of foolishness. Help them instead to find the wonder and the marvel of an ordinary life. Show them the joy of tasting tomatoes, apples and pears. Show them how to cry when pets and people die. Show them the infinite pleasure in the touch of a hand. And make the ordinary come alive for them. The extraordinary will take care of itself. (from *The Parent's Tao Te Ching*)

Perhaps the good is good enough.

Wherever goodness is found or experienced, it is always, always, always the work of God.

So, as you and I are walking in the Spirit of Jesus Christ and growing in faith, you will see such fruits of goodness. When you see them in yourselves and in others, rejoice! Highlight them, make them known, reinforce those moments of goodness for yourself and for others. All such goodness comes to us all through the love and grace of Jesus!

Thanks be to God!