

## ON BEING GOOD

Have you ever known someone whom you really admired? Did you ever look at that person and say to yourself, “I wish I could be like him or her? That person is so in control, so on top of things.” You see the way that person’s life is going, and something in you says, “Man, I would love it if my life was like that.”

The Psalmist echoes this experience in our Old Testament lesson. The psalm begins confidently enough: Happy are those who have it all together, who do right with God, and who treat people pretty well, too. Their children never fight in the grocery store. Such people never forget to get their oil changed every 3,000 miles. Their mortgage payment or rent is never late, and they pay off their credit card balance every month.

They report every penny they make to the IRS. They generously support their church and Public Television with their pledges, and volunteer weekly at the local soup kitchen. Their bananas never go soft and black in back of the refrigerator. They stay out late on Saturday night but still make it to church early on Sunday morning to set up for Neighboring after worship.

They make sure to schedule lots of quality time with their spouses, their children, their parents, friends, their pets, and their God—not necessarily in that order. Their dog never gets sick on the carpet. Their cat has no desire to scratch up the furniture. And worst—I mean most of all—they’re genuinely nice people!

Okay, the psalm this morning doesn’t exactly say all that, but it’s there, between the lines, if you listen hard enough. There’s a wistful quality to those verses that seems to say, “Someday I’m going to get there, God—if there’s a way I can possibly get there. And it will be a very happy day for me!” About 168 verses later in this long-winded Psalm, those doubts get resolved and the writer promises to remember what he has learned. He will be good for God’s sake, and for goodness’ sake.

But let’s stay with the question behind the verses for a moment and ask, by what standard should you and I measure our lives and call it “being good”? Should that standard be what’s outwardly, visibly, measurably good? Or is there another standard we should measure ourselves by?

In this morning's Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus sets the standard by which he measures goodness. And let me tell you, it's a very high one! In so many words Jesus says, it's one thing to say you must follow the law. And when you do that outwardly, it looks like all is well. But that's the Pharisaic way of being a good person: the way that believes it really doesn't matter what one thinks; it doesn't matter what's in one's heart. It's only the outward appearance that counts. As the character Fernando, played by Billy Crystal, used to say on the old Saturday Night Live program, "It is better to look good than to feel good."

Or, in the case of the Pharisees, It's better to look good than to have a good heart.

So, Jesus tells us, it's one thing to say you must follow the law. But it's another thing entirely to say that you not only must follow the law outwardly, you must also keep the deeper spiritual intention of that law. That's how you really fulfill the law. That's how you become truly good in God's eyes.

Okay, let's accept Jesus' premise for a moment, just for the sake of argument. What does keeping the spirit of the law look like? How would it pan out in real life if we made an effort to be good, not just by our outward actions and words, but also by keeping the law in our hearts?

Well, Jesus clearly laid it out pretty clearly for us in the Beatitudes. "You know that you're forbidden to kill your brother—or your sister, your wife, your husband, or whoever. But I say you can't even be angry with them! Oh, and if you call them a fool, you'll be cast into hell."

Yikes! Can any of us say we're able to obey that particular law?

Jesus went on: "You know that adultery is a no-no. But I say, if you even look at a person with lustful intentions, it's adultery of the heart."

Umm, I think I'm in trouble here, Lord!

"If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off!"

Thank God I'm left-handed!

"If you remarry after divorce, I don't care what the law calls it, I say it's adultery."

Awww, come on, Jesus. Be reasonable!

Later on in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, "If somebody hits you on the right cheek, offer them your left as well."

Now that's going too far!

And, "It's okay to love your nice neighbor, but you get to attack your enemy, right? No, I say, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you! Don't judge, or else you yourself will be judged by that same standard.

If you genuinely want to enter the Kingdom, you have to come through the narrow and very-difficult-to-enter-doorway."

Is it any wonder that Matthew reported how, when Jesus got through with his Sermon on the Mount, the crowds were astonished with his teaching! Clearly Jesus was saying, if you want to be good, you have to go beyond simply obeying the law of God. You also need to keep the spirit of God's law, the holy intention God had when God first created the law. The spirit of God's law is love. But, like the song says, "Love don't come easy." At least not always.

I came across a little story, a fable, I guess you'd call it, that sort of fits in with my sermon message this morning, and I wanted to share it with you. It's about an elephant, an owl and a butterfly.

It seems that, deep in the jungle, an elephant fell in love with a butterfly—something that, I think you'll agree, posed certain practical problems. But the elephant was determined to pursue his beloved, so he went off to seek advice from the smartest creature he knew—a wise old owl.

The elephant told the owl what was going on, shared the yearnings in his heart, and the owl responded, "Well, the only thing I know of that will help is for you to become a butterfly. But it's going to take a lot of work, so you'd better get started on it."

The elephant was delighted with the idea! He crashed back into the jungle . . . only to return shortly thereafter with a puzzled expression on his muzzle. "I probably should have asked you this before I left," said the elephant, but, how exactly do I go about becoming a butterfly?"

The owl responded, "If, in your love for your butterfly friend, you become a butterfly in your heart, you will be a butterfly to her as truly as if you sprouted wings and were able to fly."

And so it is with the life of faith. We don't become good simply by trying to do good. We become good by slowly, gradually falling in love with a way of life that asks of us more goodness, more faithfulness, more graciousness, more forgiveness and more compassion than any other life we have ever known. And that will only happen when the normal human thoughts, feelings and attitudes of our hearts are adjusted and transformed, and our loving thoughts match our loving actions.

A writer named Clarence Jordan, who wrote the book "The Cotton Patch Gospels," told a rather uncomfortable story about the line between mere outward performance of the Christian life and living life according to the spirit of the law. In 1942, Jordan founded a cooperative, interracial farm in the heart of Georgia. The farm was called "Koinonia," a Greek word that embraces such concepts as kinship, community, communion, joint participation, sharing and intimacy. The farm still exists today, and it even has a website if you're interested in learning more about it.

In the days when the Koinonia farm was first established in the Deep

South, the acceptance of such an experiment in “Kingdom living” was tense at best, and vehemently resisted at worst. One day, Clarence approached his brother Bob, who was a lawyer, to ask him if he would provide legal assistance for the controversial farm. His brother, who would one day become a state senator and justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, said no.

When Clarence asked why he wouldn’t, his brother elaborated. “I just can’t do it. You know my political ambitions. If I represented you, I might lose my job, house, everything I’ve got.”

“We might lose everything too, Bob.”

“It’s different for you.” Bob replied.

“Why is it different?” Clarence asked. “I seem to remember that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. And I recall that when we came forward the preacher asked you the same question he asked me. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

His brother responded, “I accept and follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.”

“Could that point by any chance be—the cross?”

“That’s right. I follow Jesus up to the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.”

Clarence said, “Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple. You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to and tell them you’re just an admirer of Christ, not a disciple.”

“Well now,” countered Bob, “if everyone who felt like me did that, we wouldn’t have a church, would we?”

“Maybe not,” Clarence said, “but if everyone who feels like you stays in the church, merely admiring Jesus, what kind of church do we really have? And is it truly a church?”

Okay, so where does that leave us as Christians and people of God? All we’ve heard this morning is that the Lord demands excessive things of us—high and lofty standards that we can’t possibly meet, no matter how hard we try. No human being can control their thoughts and their feelings. So who on earth can possibly be good—as defined by Jesus’ teachings in his Sermon on the Mount? Are we all doomed? Is our fate sealed?

Not necessarily.

Regarding Jesus’ impossible to achieve high standards, this is my thought: if he demanded only easy, piece-of-cake things of us, we could be good through our own effort. We wouldn’t need the compassionate, loving and forgiving God Jesus talked about so passionately.

And if the bar of divine righteousness was set so low we could dance over it without breaking a sweat, and it was “piece-of-cake easy” to be good, our relationship with the Lord would ultimately deteriorate into apathy or evaporate altogether because, after all, we can just do it ourselves, without any help from above.

“Go away, God, I got this.”

But we can’t cut God out of the equation like that because God does expect seemingly excessive things of us; and at the same time, the God who loves us dearly will respond to our failures with abundant forgiveness. And when we realize the immeasurable depth of God’s mercy and love, our relationship with God grows in gratitude and joy.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer who began the Protestant movement 500 years ago this year, once wrote in so many words that Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount with “Blessed are the poor in spirit” because even if we feel rich in spirit when Jesus starts teaching, by the time Jesus is done demonstrating just how far short of God’s standard of goodness and righteousness we are, we all look poor in spirit. And that forces us to acknowledge that you and I are exactly the kind of people Jesus came into the world to love and save.

That’s a very humbling thing to have to admit, isn’t it? But it’s very appropriate to have humility in the presence of the God who formed us out of the dust of the earth.

I want to end my message this morning with this word. At the very end of Matthew’s Gospel, the risen Jesus stands on a mountaintop, offering his final words to the disciples before he returns to God the Father. And Jesus instructs them—and us, of course—to baptize and teach the whole world “all that I have commanded you.”

And then comes Jesus’ punchline, a promise from him that makes our attempts to be good inside and out, in our hearts and minds, something we can strive to do with great hope and joy.

“Lo, I am with you always,” Jesus says, “until the end of the age.”

Christ is always with us, to guide and strengthen us as we strive day by day, doing our best to grow into more and more faithful disciples. And, of course, Christ is also present to forgive us and encourage us to carry on and continue trying when we fail.

“Yes,” says Jesus, “I am with you always.” Not just to tell you that you need a change of heart, but to help your heart to change. Not just to command you to be good, but to show you how to be good, as well. And, Jesus says, when

you fall short in your efforts, as you inevitably will do, I will remind you about our gracious and merciful God, from whom I came, who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

And therein lies our hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.