

2018 09 09 – Goodness

James 2:1-10, 14-17

All through my childhood and even into adulthood, my mother had a saying that she would shout out the door every time one of her children left to go to school or church or baseball or hockey or some other event in the community. Each time once of us ventured into the wider world, her parting words were, “Be good.”

Mom was so consistent with this phrase that I got to wondering if she thought we would be bad if she forgot to say it. It was important to her that her children would “be good.” But what does that mean? When we talk about “being good” what are we really saying?

Last week I started a sermon series based on the fruits of the Spirit as they are listed in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In the letter, Paul explains that fruits of the Spirit are gifts from God. One of those fruits of the Spirit is “goodness” and one of the definitions of goodness is “the quality or state of being good.”

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/goodness> So today we are exploring goodness. We are exploring what it means to “be good.”

Melanie has already started this discussion during our Community Learning Time and certainly, for most of, “being good” means not being bad, not doing anything that would embarrass our mothers, avoiding all the sins that are listed in the Ten Commandments and maybe adding a few more rules that our parents, or our teachers, have instilled in our hearts and our minds.

At the end of last year, USA Today, published an article that said, “‘being a better person’ [was] the most popular New Year's resolution for 2018. It was also the No. 1 resolution [in 2017], marking a shift from the previous decade in which “losing weight” topped the list 80% of the time.” It seems that “being good” has become a goal for a majority of the people in the United States.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/12/26/you-good-person/967459001/>

The article goes on to ask the same question that we are asking: What does it actually mean to be good? And the author notes, “Social psychologists, ethicists and religious leaders say we see eye-to-eye on the big stuff. We believe it's good to be kind, fair and just; it's bad to cheat, murder and steal.” I don't think anyone would argue with that, would they?

But it is true that there are differing opinions about what is good and what is bad. For instance, why can't everyone agree on issues like: abortion, homosexuality, and racial and gender equality? Well the experts tell us those differences exist because we rank our values differently and the values that we focus on are determined by the family, the time and the culture in which we were raised.

According to this same article in USA Today, “Cultural psychologists have found political variations, for example: conservatives place importance on values such as loyalty and authority, while liberals prioritize care and fairness.” Obviously that's a broad generalization but it can help us to understand different people's concepts of what is good or bad and what it means to “be good.”

As Christians, our values have been and are being impacted by the scriptures that we read and study each week. In particular, we tend to focus on the life and teachings of Jesus and his followers. We believe that Jesus was an excellent role model and that the New Testament has a lot to teach us about being “good.”.

In today’s reading from James we heard some very clear direction about how we should act in the world, about the meaning of goodness. The author admonished the members of the early church for showing favoritism to those who were rich and then he wrote:

You’re acting rightly, however, if you fulfill the venerable law of the scriptures: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show favoritism, you commit sin, and that same law convicts you as transgressors. Those who keep the whole law except for one small point are still guilty of breaking all of it.

As I was searching for quotes and ideas this week, I came across one that I thought very succinctly stated the meaning of “goodness.” Here it is:

Goodness is about character - integrity, honesty, kindness, generosity, moral courage, and the like. More than anything else, it is about how we treat other people. <https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/goodness>

It’s a great quote... isn’t it? But you won’t find it in this week’s bulletin because I hesitated to use it. You see the person who wrote these words is named Dennis Prager. Wikipedia describes Prager as “an American nationally syndicated radio

talk show host and writer. He is Jewish and deeply religious, and his views generally align with the Christian right.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_Prager

When I read those words, I realized that Dennis Prager has a very conservative view of many of the social and political issues of our day, so, when you get down to specifics, his idea of what is good and bad is, no doubt, different than mine.

But his words say exactly what the author of James was trying to say: “More than anything else, [goodness] is about how we treat other people.” We can follow all the other rules, but if we ignore the needs of the poor or the marginalized, then we cannot call ourselves good. We can be as spiritual or as religious as possible, but as the author of James put it, “If good deeds don’t go with it, faith is dead.”

To truly “be good” is not easy. My mother did not give her children a simple task. We have already noted that not everyone has the same values but even for those of us with similar ideas about what is right there can be lots of grey areas, lots of times when what is “good” isn’t obvious. For example, consider the question of whether it’s OK to perform testing on a handful of animals to save thousands of human lives. When is doing a bad thing OK? When is being bad, good?

Peter Singer, a professor at Princeton University says that “trade-offs are essential, because virtually nobody is a saint.” Sometimes we do have to make difficult decisions and do something that we normally see as wrong for the greater good. But he also believes that how defensible a moral trade-off is depends on the details and each case must be evaluated on its own merit. If we

consistently make trade-offs that benefit ourselves while disadvantaging others, then we are definitely not being good.

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Goodness is one of the fruits of the Spirit and that means it is a gift from God. Every one of us has been given this gift, so we each have the ability to be good. But we also need to realize that we are all imperfect human beings and that being good is what we strive for but it is not always our reality,,, and that's OK. Anne Frank, recognized this fact while she was still a teenager, hiding in an attic with her family. She wrote:

Human greatness does not lie in wealth or power, but in character and goodness. People are just people, and all people have faults and shortcomings, but all of us are born with a basic goodness.

I invite you to reflect on the goodness that exists within you. How do you demonstrate God's goodness in your family and your community? How do you respond to the voice in your head that reminds you to "be good." May we all recognize and appreciate goodness as a gift that we have been given and offer all that we are to God's work in the world.