

August 11, 2019

What is Good?

Shepherd's Grace Church

³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ³⁵“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. ³⁹“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” (Luke 12: 32-40)

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

¹⁰Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ¹²When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; ¹³bringing offerings is futile; it is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. ¹⁴Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. ¹⁸Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. ¹⁹If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; ²⁰but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20)

Franklin Roosevelt once said, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” Many people want to attribute that saying to the “fireside” chat he had with the American people immediately after the attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor. The reality is, statement was made as a part of his first inaugural address.

The statement was made to calm our fears regarding the impending “Great Depression.” Roosevelt’s words of encouragement were not words intended to calm people and prepare them for the struggles of a war against powers outside our nation, instead, the statement was made to calm the fears the United States citizens were having regarding the economy of our very own country.

At the time these words were written, they were not written to strengthen our resolve regarding a war and make an attempt to justify our involvement in world conflict. They were not written to make a plea to put American servicemen in harms way to protect a greater good. These words were written to remind us as a people, instead, that we have a moral responsibility to look past our immediate circumstances and recognize that we must always be willing to work together to attain the vision our nation has always aspired to, a vision brimming with confidence; a vision teeming with possibility; a vision offering opportunity and not obsolescence.

His message was intended to remind us as a nation that we are not a nation given to turning in and taking care only of our own individual interest. We are a nation dedicated to the proposition of working together to achieve possibilities for all people to be successful; men, women, people of all races and creeds and colors. His message was that we are not a nation ruled by fear. We are a nation that puts fear behind and boldly steps out with confidence in the face of great odds.

His message was about the fear we are so often faced with, the fear of making a choice which has the possibility of failure. His message collides squarely with the messages of Luke and Isaiah that we just heard this morning.

In Luke, Jesus teaches: "Do not be afraid, little flock." I can't say for sure that FDR was taking his message from this passage, but the two messages are strongly supportive of each other. FDR is encouraging us as a people a move forward, take risks, do things differently because continuing to do things the same way is not producing a result that aids all people in achieving security that we demand for all people.

Isaiah identifies the under protected groups that find themselves at risk when we are ruled by fear. Orphans and widows, the poor and needy, people most at risk when others try to manipulate the system for their own personal gain.

The people in power in Isaiah's time were people who had gotten comfortable with wealth and power. They were the top one or two percent who controlled the bulk of the wealth of the nation. They were the priests and the rulers who had come to expect a lavish and comfortable lifestyle and were willing to achieve that lifestyle at the expense of the less privileged people not able to afford the taxes being levied on them.

Isaiah was an advocate of change. He was suggesting that as a people, God's people could do better. He was suggesting that all people could be served by some people recognizing the human value...no the Holy value of every person.

The people at the top were afraid of change. They were scared that if they changed the system even a little and added a measure of comfort to those who were "less than" them, it might affect the level of comfort they themselves were used to. It didn't matter that these people had huge amounts of wealth left over. It didn't matter that these people were making elaborate and elegant sacrifices at temple. What mattered was that there were others living in fear.

God said to the elite, your sacrifices are mis-directed. They are the sacrifices of your very best, but they are sacrifices intended to get you notices by others. They are

sacrifices intended to draw attention to you and not to me. They are sacrifices I expect you to make but I expect you to make them in secret. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

Luke 10 tells us the attitude we should have. It is not an attitude of fear or a feeling of foreboding. It is an attitude that acknowledges God as the one best suited for determining how our gifts are used. The people of Isaiah's time wanted to suggest that their sacrifices should be used for showing off. Luke says they have already received their rewards.

Isaiah says the Lord despises the people's giving for show. Isaiah says their fear comes from their lack of willingness to care for those who have less than them, the ones who are their responsibility. He further says that because the rich and powerful are acting out of their own interest and not out of interest in serving those less fortunate, they will be devoured, ended, exiled.

Isaiah's point is that fear breeds fear. It is the same point as FDR. It is really the same point Jesus makes in the reading from Luke this morning. "Do not be afraid, little ones," he says. "It is your Father's good desire to give to you the kingdom."

Just two weeks ago, when we were studying the Lord's prayer, Jesus used the same words. "If we, who are evil know how to give good gifts, how much more does the Father, know how to give good gifts to us?" (Luke 11) We have nothing to fear, Jesus says because it is God who wants to give. Our sacrifices are insignificant in the face of the sacrifice God is willing to make for us. Our sacrifice is motivated by our fears that we will somehow be diminished. God wants us to know that we have nothing to fear but fear itself.

God invites us, this morning to alter our reality. He invites us to be motivated not by failure and the fear of it, but by the possibility of success. God invites us to re-frame the question. Instead of what happens if we fail, we should be asking ourselves, what happens if we proceed knowing we cannot fail. More accurately, God wants us to ask, "What happens if we proceed with the notion that even if we do fail, we will still succeed because we will be given every chance to try again until we get it right." We should recognize this morning that we have nothing to fear period!

God will not allow us to fail because it is God's good desire for us to succeed. And what is good? Good is that which stands in opposition to evil. Good is the one standing inside the door waiting, anticipating the need of others and being prepared to meet it. Good is that which, even when at the rest is always at the ready.

John Wesley asks the question, "is there ever a right time to do the wrong thing?" Good is the answer to that question. Of course, there is never a right time to do the wrong thing. When we are young, we are tempted and tested by peer pressure. The wrong thing is ever before us. It comes often at the expense of the fourth commandment; "Honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land that the Lord your God has given you."

Our parents are willing to give us freedoms as we grow. They give us increasing responsibility and often privilege as we demonstrate to them that we are willing and able to make correct decisions regarding the rules they have set before us. We as youngsters often push the rules, even to the point of breaking and most times, that is all right with our parents. They genuinely do not mind us pushing the rules. Our push tells them we are aware and have respect for their instructions. When we break the rules, that is when we show disregard for their authority and that is when there is a need to take remedial action. That is when there is a need for punishment.

I had a friend, growing up. His name was Mark. Mark had twin brothers, Dan and Don. Mark was clearly the smallest in their family. In fact, as I remember it, Mark was the smallest guy in our class. One day, Mark and I were walking home from school. His brothers, Dan and Don were waiting in the bushes for us. I saw them before we reached them and gave Mark a signal. As we approached the bushes, just as Dan and Don were about to jump out, Mark and I jumped in.

One of us hit Dan square in the Jaw, the other hit Don in the gut. They both gave out a surprised grunt and immediately ran off. I later learned that Dan had lost two teeth in the exchange and had to make an emergency trip to the dentist. Don, apparently was ok. I honestly don't remember which of us hit Dan and which hit Don. All I know is that we believed we were going to be hit and we decided, without knowing, that we would hit first.

We thought we were just going to have a little good fun at the expense of Mark's brothers but what started out as fun ended up in the emergency room and with some potential for damage to Mark's brother. Our actions were not right. We did the wrong thing.

Were Dan and Don going to do the wrong thing? That is a whole other question; one I do not know the answer to and neither does Mark. We cannot say for sure what was going to happen next but we never had a chance to find out. We did the wrong thing at the wrong time and a person was injured as a result of our actions.

Jesus reminds us this morning that there is never a right time to do a wrong thing. The prophet Isaiah reminds us of the consequences. Our challenge as people who follow Jesus is to be patient and wait for the circumstances of a situation to be fully revealed so that we can act with all information. We must wait patiently while always being willing and ready to act. Only then can we be full servants of the one who is coming, our Master and our Lord!

Today, we stand in the wake of El Paso and Dayton. The shootings there were heinous! The actions were evil but what is the good. How does the good stand in the wake of such evil. How does God stand in the wake of such evil?

The answer is difficult and it is one we Christians stand divided with. I want to stand with those who suggest we should put an end to all privately owned guns. We live in the 21st century where we really have no need to hunt for our food here in the western world. We can buy food at the store much cheaper than we can hunt and kill our own. We have no real and practical opportunity to provide a strong militia aimed at

overthrowing our government if the armed forces of that government came to overpower us.

The second amendment is a reality that we as a nation could not hope to realize. It provides for the opportunity for all citizens to own weapons in the event that the government might try to form a monarchy and tyrannize us. The reality is that if the leaders of the government tried to do this, they would have very little opposition because their weaponry is much greater than the collective weaponry of private citizens.

I own three guns and over the years I have enjoyed hunting and eating what I hunted but in the 21st century, I would have no difficulty giving up these guns for the greater good of preventing mass shootings like the ones witnessed last week.

The other reality, however is that even if I give up my guns and all other law-abiding citizens give up their guns, the people who would want to perpetrate crimes of this nature would still find a way to obtain their guns.

It is my understanding that in both shootings last weekend, guns were obtained legally and yet, even if this were not the case, I believe the criminals who perpetrated the shootings would have been able to obtain the guns.

There does not seem to be a good solution here...or is there? What if we approach the question from the perspective of the treasure that is really important to us? What if we consider the treasure we want to store up in eternity? What does that treasure look like?

When people find themselves in crisis or imminent danger and they have an opportunity to quickly grab those things in their lives that are most important to them, what do they grab? What do they cling to? What would you cling to?

Most people faced with these circumstances cling to pictures, letters, mementos, reminders of family and friends and familiar situations they might like to look back to. They do not grab jewelry or electronics or other financially valuable items. They know these things can be replaced but the memories are their true treasure.

Our treasure is our love, our lives and the ones closest to us in those lives. Our treasure is that which touches our heart. This realization brings us to the good that Jesus wants us to know and share today. It is the realization that we cannot tell people what to cling to. People who want to cling to guns will cling to them. People who want to cling to vengeance will cling to vengeance. People who want to cling to striking first instead of waiting, watching and wondering what might happen if a situation plays out will cling to a first strike mentality.

The apostle Paul tells us, however at the end of 1Cor. 12 and the beginning of 13 that there is a more excellent way. Of course, this way is love! Love is the treasure we can take with us even to eternity. It is the treasure that can never be stolen or destroyed. Love never fails.

Jesus tells us this morning that we need not be afraid because God's good pleasure is to give to us the kingdom, and the kingdom is love. Love is God's motivator and in order for us to bring about the truth of the kingdom, it must become our motivator as well. Love overcomes hatred not with violence or evil but with compassion and caring. Love overcomes anger, not with brute force but with the force of caring and concern.

If we truly want to be the caretakers of the kingdom, we must change the culture of that kingdom. We must be committed to continuing the march started hundreds of years ago. A march toward equality for all people where not are missing and none are broken. In the *Declaration of Independence* it is written that "All people (Sic) are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

These words preceded the constitution of the United States and the 2nd amendment to that constitution as well. These words were and are intended to create a culture of love for all people and an environment where all people would have an opportunity to succeed.

These words precede but marry consistently with the civil rights movement of the '60's and the words of Martin Luther King who said we must always conduct ourselves on the high plain of moral dignity and discipline never allowing the threats of violence to be met with physical force but always with soul force.

These words marry to the sentiment of Ronald Regan who invited us to pray for one another as he accepted the nomination as president of the United States and they are echoed in the sentiments of FDR and his message that we truly have nothing to fear but fear itself.

When we allow ourselves to think we can anticipate a wrong thing and make a wrong action we are acting out of fear. When the shooter in El Paso attacked people of another skin color because he thought they were coming to steal his wealth, he was acting out of fear.

We must act as Jesus instructs us here today. We must change our culture and recognize that the only treasure we have is the treasure of our love, love for one another and love for the differences we bring to one another as our gifts. We are greatest when we receive these gifts and store them us and the strength that will allow us to stand at the ready.

We must act in answer to the question I asked earlier. What would you do if you could do something you truly loved and know you could not fail. YOU WOULD DO IT!! Of course you would! We all would! We would not hesitate. But, you see, failure is fear and we live in this world where failure is regarded as something to be avoided so we never try.

We must remember that God desires to give to us the Kingdom. We cannot fail if we are willing to allow God's will to be done. We can only fail if we fail to try. To that end, we must remember the second question I asked. Would you try to do something if you knew you could fail but that you would not be judged by your failure?

This is the more difficult question, I think. It allows for the judgements of other to creep into our thinking. It allows for us to forget the words of Jesus and live by the words of Satan. In Luke 4, Satan says, "Turn these stones to bread and Jesus answers, 'Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God!'"

We so frequently live by fear of what others think that we fail to try what we would most like to try. You all know I like to sing. You also know I am not very good at it. This past Sunday, I shared with the congregation a song that I knew I could not sing well but I shared it without fear(Well maybe with some fear) that I would be judged because I know the congregation loves me. The words are below and the tune is "Sweet Caroline."

I shared knowing I could fail but recognizing that the culture I was sharing in was one of Love. I wonder what it might look like if we could all share this culture instead of a culture of fear. Read the words and hear the music in your head, knowing that the music you hear is authentic and that which I share is slightly off key—LOL

Where faith began, I can't begin to know it
But then I know it's growing strong
Was it the joy
The joy of watching someone
Who'd have believed you'd come along

Hands, touching hands
Reaching out, touching me, touching you

Sweet God of mine
Good times never seemed so good
I'd be inclined
To believe they never would
But now I

Look at the light and night don't seem so lonely
We filled it up with love from you
And when I hate
Hating runs off my shoulders
How can I hate when I know you

One, touching one
Reaching out, touching me, touching you

Sweet God of mine
Good times never seemed so good
I'd be inclined
To believe they never would
Oh no, no

Sweet God of mine
Good times never seemed so good
Sweet God of mine
I believe they never could

I shared in a culture of Love. It is a culture that I believe God calls us to create. It is, I believe the true Kingdom of God and It has come near.

Let us work together for this Kingdom beginning today because it is the Father's good desire to give this kingdom to us!

We have nothing to rear but fear itself. Amen!