Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

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GRACE AND GOODNESS Mark 10:17–31

When my father, a Baptist preacher, retired, he continued to participate in Sunday worship, only now as member of the congregation. On any number of occasions, once he had returned home from church, we would hear him exclaim, “If I have to hear another ‘how to be good’ sermon, I just may decide to stop going to worship.” It isn’t that Dad stopped believing that we human beings should try to do that which is good in the world. What he objected to was that goodness was defined in a simplistic way and was usually reduced to things like going to church, and being polite, and giving money to the church. Do these things, he was told, and you are on your way to being good!

I trust that we know that to try to be good is far more complicated than following a few doable rules. It requires what the prophet Micah said: “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) Trying to be good, trying to do that which is good in the world is a demanding business.

First, we must discern between what is good and what is evil. This is especially important for us to do in a time when everything seems to be permitted. These days, we can be as greedy as we want (as long as we keep within the law). We can be totally unconcerned about the poor and the needy. We can use up the earth’s resources as fast as we want. There are no limits. The Christian, however, must step back and ponder God’s will. What is it that God desires for us and for our world? What is needed for our time? For us, *that* will be the good we strive after.

*That* will be the good we try to do. There was a time when everyone seemed to know that was good and what was evil. But those times are over. It’s partly because we live in a largely secular world, and also in a religiously pluralistic world. What is defined as good in one particular religious tradition may not hold true for another tradition or for those of no religion. One thing seems clear. You cannot put the decision as to what constitutes the good up for a vote. Majority rule may not be God’s rule. A majority in Nazi Germany, in the name of Christianity, found it perfectly acceptable to persecute Jews. But a minority of Christians considered the persecution of the Jewish people an evil. And so it is incumbent upon each new generation to discern between what is good and what is evil. What was considered good in one generation may not hold true for the next. There was a time when slavery was an accepted practice, but we would not think to accept slavery in our time.

Once we discern that which is good and what is evil, it is important for us to pursue the good, upholding it with our words, and putting it into practice in our doing. But it is more complicated that that. We human beings are ourselves a mixture of good and evil, and in our hearts these two exist side by side. The apostle Paul put it this way in his letter to the Romans. “The good that I would, that I do not; and the evil that I would not that I do . . . Wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:15, 24) No one can therefore be called good. Even Jesus himself refused to be called good.

The rich man addresses Jesus as “Good Teacher,” and Jesus says to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” The rich man wants to know how he can inherit life. Jesus then repeats to him the commandments, and the rich man says that he has done all these since his youth. That ought to make him good and therefore worthy of eternal life. But Jesus then pushes the envelope. “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When the rich man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

We tend to focus on the requirement that the rich man sell everything he has and follow Jesus, but this morning, I want to suggest a slightly different take on the demand Jesus lays upon the rich man. I think that Jesus in making this seemingly impossible demand upon the man is really saying that it is impossible for humans to do enough good in the world. There will always be a good that is unreachable for us, simply because we are human and a mixture of good and evil. We can never do enough good in the world. We are always going to fall short.

This, I believe, is what lies behind Jesus words to his disciples:

“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God?” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible. —Mark 10:23–27

Enter grace. It is only by God’s grace that we may enter the kingdom of God. We cannot earn our way into it by doing good, simply because we can never do enough good in the world. There will always be something more that we could have done. Moreover, the good that we do can so easily become tainted by evil. Our goodness can become an occasion for pride and self-righteousness. Said the great preacher William Sloane Coffin: “Those who make a virtue out of being virtuous are like giraffes. They are lofty up front but dragging a bit in the behind.”

We are a mixture of good and evil, every one of us, and so all of us stand in need of the grace of God. It’s all about grace, amazing grace.

It’s not only our evil that needs to be forgiven by the grace of God. It is also the good that we do that needs to be forgiven, for we can never do enough good, and the good that we do is never pure and free from all those other kinds of motives, less than honorable, that lie behind good deeds, whether it be doing good in order to win favor from God or from our neighbors, or doing good in order to receive a reward, or for any other number of reasons (you get the point). That our good has to be forgiven along with the evil we do is the message of a wonderful poem written over a hundred years ago by the Quaker John Greenleaf Whittier. Whittier, you may know, was tireless in his efforts to abolish slavery, and by any standard did a lot of good in the world. But in the end he realized that the good he did needed to be forgiven, because no human being can ever do enough of it. In his poem, he contemplates his own ending, and wonders how God will judge his life. Here are the words of the poem.

*When on my day of life the night is falling,*

*And in the winds, from unsunned spaces blown,*

*I hear far voices out of darkness calling*

*My feet to paths unknown.*

*Thou who has made my home of life so pleasant,*

*Leave not its tenant when its walls decay;*

*O Love Divine, O Helper ever present,*

*Be Thou my Strength and stay!*

*Suffice it if—my good and ill unreckoned,*

*And both forgiven through Thy abounding grace—*

*I find myself by hands familiar beckoned*

*Unto my fitting place—. . .*

Thanks be to God. We live by grace. Yet, even so, may we, strange mixture of good and evil that we are, never cease in our striving to do good in our world, in our families, among our friends. And then, let us leave the rest to God’s mercy and God’s grace. Amen.

Acknowledgment: For this sermon, I am indebted to my teacher and friend, Douglas John Hall, and his essay, “Beyond Good and Evil” to be found in his new book, *Waiting for Gospel.*