

***Shiloh United Methodist Church***  
Goodness In the Eyes of the Receiver

Galatians 6:9-10,      Rev. Tyler Amundson      September 22, 2019  
Colossians 3:23-24

Colossians 3:23-24 Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>23</sup> Whatever you do, do it from the heart for the Lord and not for people. <sup>24</sup> You know that you will receive an inheritance as a reward. You serve the Lord Christ.

Galatians 6:9-10 Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>9</sup> Let's not get tired of doing good, because in time we'll have a harvest if we don't give up. <sup>10</sup> So then, let's work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith.

How many of you remember the movie *The Wizard of Oz*? For many of the time period it was produced it was one of the first color films they saw. It took Dorothy from a land of black and white to a land filled with color, dreams, and hope for change. One of the characters I remember vividly from my first time watching it was the Wicked Witch of the West. The cackle and the evil, the sense that all she wanted to do was to hurt Toto and Dorothy and anyone connected with them. The clarity of how evil and wrong her actions were seemed, so clear to me the first time I watched the movie.

Yet something always bothered me, the scene where the water was tossed on her. People seemed too happy that she was gone, and all the good of erasing her seemed too easy.

Today we continue our Faith by Numbers series by studying the second of the Methodist general rules. Do Good, last week we studied "Do No Harm" and this week we study "Do Good."

Last week I shared with you a definition of good, that comes from the first rule of “do no harm.” It derives directly from the law Jesus shared was what we needed to follow in order to live a holy life. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Good, and doing good is grounded in this rule, because if you seek to follow this rule, to find connection with others, and to offer the abundant life of loving others then in turn you will find what it means to do good. The trick is once you find ways to love others, you have to learn to pay attention to where you might be able to do good, and keep in mind your version of good might not be the best way to do no harm.

Let me begin with a story of good done in the name of love by someone ready when they were presented with an opportunity.

Some years ago, a college student boarded a bus, heading home for spring break. Because the bus was nearly full, he sat down next to a man staring out the window. The man was middle-aged and dressed in denim. He bore the hard-edged look of someone haunted by a life he would rather soon forget. The man was not up for small talk. He was lost in himself. He simply gazed at the passing cornfields and farmhouses as the bus rolled along the two-lane country roads.

A couple of hours into the ride, the hard-edged man grew agitated. Fingering his work cap, he stared down at the floor, only casting quick glances out the window as if not wanting to look too long. The college student asked if the man was okay. The man regarded him, glanced once more out the window, then desperately shared his tale.

“Twenty years ago,” the man confessed, “I killed a man. I was boozin’ it up, got inside a car, never saw the guy

just crossing the street. I've been in prison all these years just thinkin' about it. I felt so ashamed. I sent a letter to my folks—told 'em that I knew I wasn't any good and that I was in prison, but I didn't tell 'em where. As far as they were concerned, they should count me dead. I haven't seen or heard from 'em ever since.

"I got paroled a couple days ago. Didn't have no place to go really. So I wrote my folks. I told 'em I was getting out. And I know I've brought nothing but shame to them and our family, but I told 'em if they would have me, I would love to come home. I'd get it if they didn't want me back. So I'd make it easy on 'em. In our front yard is this big, old oak tree. The bus drives right by our house on the way into town. If they would have me, all they got to do is tie a yellow ribbon around that tree. If it's there, I'll get off the bus at town and come home. If it's not there, I'll just stay on the bus. And they don't ever have to lay eyes on me again.

"The thing is, now that we're getting close, I'm not sure I can bear to look. I mean, I get it. But if that oak tree is bare, why, I don't know what I'll do." The man started to look out the window then stopped himself, staring at the floor instead. Then an idea came to him.

"Say," he asked the student, "would you mind looking for me? I'll just look the other way, and you can let me know."

The student agreed, and the man swapped seats with him. The student scouted while the ex-con fingered his cap and stared at the floor. House after house passed by. Tree after tree was barren of ribbons. The bus drove closer to the town.

Then, with a shout, the student saw it. "Oh my God, you have to see this!"

The ex-con dared to look as the bus was passing his childhood home. A giant oak tree stood sentry in the yard. The tree did not bear a single yellow ribbon; it boasted hundreds of them. Flapping in the breeze from every branch of the tree, an explosion of yellow ribbons proclaimed to the world, "Our boy is coming home. And we cannot wait to embrace him."<sup>1</sup>

Next I want to share a story about someone who did good, and continued to try to do good, only to find out his version of good was not what was needed in a certain part of his life.

John is someone we have been following in stories the last few weeks. When we left John last week he was with his friends, "the Holy Club," at his college and they were going to the prisons taking bibles as well as blankets.

John and his friends continued to highlight the horrible conditions in the prisons they went to visit until a man named, General James Oglethorpe, a wealthy influential man took the concern to others in the government. This work got these unhealthy prisons shut down, and people who were in due to just being in debt were set free. Now they had a new problem though, they had hundreds to thousands of people who were poor and without work.

James Oglethorpe had an idea, they would take these poor penniless people to a new colony their country had founded. Then Oglethorpe asked John to be the pastor of the people he had been helping and move to this new land.

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers, Frank. Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus . Upper Room Books. Kindle Edition. Pg. 14-15

In route to the new land on a sailing ship, John's ship got caught in a terrible storm. Many of the people, including John were terrified their ship was going to end up on the bottom of the ocean. To John's surprise a group of people were not showing their terror, they were singing hymns, praying, and seemed at great peace in the chaos. These people were known as Moravians. They were a group of Christians who were deeply rooted in prayer, and who would carry John through the darkness in his life. John on this trip would get to know them, and begin to admire them.

John's ship did eventually reach the land they had set out for. I want to remind us that John is, John Wesley the founder of the Methodist tradition, and he was being asked to be the Pastor of the people in the new colony of Savannah in Georgia.

When he arrived he became as disciplined as we heard last week he was with his friends. And in fact even more so. He held 5 services of worship per day, and expected people to attend all the services. He also attempted to share the good news of Christ with the native peoples, and got frustrated with that work because the people without watches would never show up on time.

John's hope to do good seemed to keep frustrating him. Eventually, something great happened to John. He fell in love and things seemed to be getting better. Sophie Hopkey was the woman's name, and she was everything John could have ever imagined in a partner. However, John was so focused on doing good that he forgot to pay attention to Sophie, and forgot to ask to marry her. Eventually, Sophie found another partner and decided to get married.

John in his efforts to do good, got mad, and refused to serve Sophie communion. Which was a bad mistake, because Sophie was the

daughter of the governor. John Wesley would have a warrant issued for his arrest, and instead of face his faults he stole away on a ship and headed back to England. Fearing that he would never do good, complete his call, or ever be able to do good again.

Wesley's story is good to hear and next week we will hear the redemption part. Today I stopped here because there is a myth in our culture that people need to be completely good to do good. However, that is not the narrative of our faith. Our faith says, that doing good is a call God will put on all people. In fact it says that the convict in the first story, by trusting the boy may have given the boy a confidence he needed to be a good person, and the boy by being the eyes of the convict did good. They both in turn were needed to complete the good that God put before them. Wesley needed to attempt good and not find success because he would learn a deeper good that would let him know his business, constant discipline, was not what of his method would help people. More next week on this.

Seeing that good is how it moments are sometime perceived is why later in my life I fell in love with the Broadway Musical *Wicked*, which is the backstory behind *The Wizard of Oz*. In *Wicked*, you learn that the Wicked Witch of the West has a name, and it is Elphaba. She and Glenda the good witch are actually dear friends caught on opposite sides of political craziness. And if you haven't seen it yet, then don't listen to the next part. Through a series of events Elphaba has been trapped in a situation where she has been made to be seen as the awful witch I thought I knew as a young child, despite her attempts to do good. In turn she is looking for a way to escape the chaos of people calling her evil. That awful moment when she is covered in water and dies, is actually a moment of good for her. She escapes through a trap door below her dress, after screaming she was melting, and runs away with the one she loves.

It is a baptism moment that we hear the cries of Elphaba, it is a moment of escape to a new life. In a moment that always bothered me as sad and uncomfortable when I only knew the first part of the story, but it was really a moment of freedom. Elphaba wasn't really hurt by water, she just made it seem that way to become new.

Goodness comes in moments we don't expect, sometimes we just need to see it from the angle of what God might be doing. Sometimes we need to step back to see where the good is actually happening. Wesley had to, Paul would always do it in his ministry, and we are called to do it in our living of the faith.

One of my favorite authors, Bishop John Shelby Spong, writes this about the good talked about in Paul's writings.

...we find Paul dealing with human beings who are acting very much like human beings. Paul knows what every pastor knows— namely, that congregations are not made up of angels. At the same time congregations learn very quickly that ordination does not bestow perfection on their ordained leader. Pastoral care is the sensitive attempt to bring wholeness out of an exchange between human passion and human insecurity. It is a delicately nuanced balancing act, the purpose of which is to enhance the humanity of all who are involved. If we need a text to describe what I believe is the goal of all pastoral activity, it would be the Fourth Gospel's definition of Jesus' purpose: "I have come," John has Jesus say, "that they might have life and have it abundantly" (10: 10). That is finally both the mission of the Christian church and the hoped-for outcome in every pastoral relationship. Abundant life, please note, does not always mean happiness or even the easing of pain. Many people seek wholeness in quite destructive ways, with addiction to drugs, alcohol, sex and even success being just a

few of them. Sometimes abundant life becomes possible only in confrontation and brokenness. Real pastoral care is not about helping another to feel good; it is about helping wholeness to be created. Paul understood that and every pastor must learn it sooner or later. Wholeness is seen in the freedom to be and in the ability to escape the survival mentality that inevitably locks us into self-centeredness. Wholeness is found in the maturity of being able to live for another by giving our love away.<sup>2</sup>

Friends like the story of the wicked witch, and other stories of good we have heard today. We have to consider which good we can see in the story, we have to understand how to do no harm. Loving is not easy, this is clear. Loving everybody is hard. As we seek to learn to live our faith, we need to trust that we will always be learning and that God will do God's best to help our good make a difference in the world, however, like my own mind with the Wizard of Oz story, we all may have to come back and understand more before we can see good in the places we least expect it.

Blessings and God bless on the journey.

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<sup>2</sup> Spong, John Shelby. Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World (pp. 248-249). Harper Collins, Inc.. Kindle Edition.