

Being the Church in Jesus Christ: The Wisdom of Pastor Paul

Brentwood Sermons for 2015

Doing Good in the Midst of Evil

Feb 15, 2015

**Ps 103 & 1 Thess 5:12-14 – Text = 1 Thess 5:8
(69, 692, 774, 498)**

It's important in understanding Paul
to realize how much he likes good.
He delights in the good.
And he sees it everywhere,
but especially in the people who have gathered
in Christian communities
to nourish souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Paul is clear about how this nourishing of the good takes place.

It is initiated and sustained by God
through the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is a gift to all.

And it involves God helping us to remove the barriers
we constantly put up to protect us from this goodness.

I watched and read the news in a special way this week.
I was looking for the ratio of good news to bad news.

The results are depressing.
It's a rough and impressionistic calculation,
but I'd say that the ratio I found was 10/1
in favour of bad news.

It takes many forms, as you all know
all too well.

It's about murders and thwarted murders.
It's about wars and failed cease-fires.
It's about rapes and abuse.
It's about economic corruption and exploitation.
It's about political divisions and stalemates.

So, where is the good in all of this?
How do we see it and do it
when so many who are interpreting our society to us
are so focused on the evil that is out there?

I think we can find some profound wisdom on that
in the writings of Pastor Paul.

To see the good in the world and to do that good,
Paul starts with God and God's will for us.
God deeply desires that we enjoy and do good.
That's how we are made.
That's what we are made for.
Didn't God create us and all that is
and see that it is good?

Paul's admonition and encouragement
throughout his writings to the early churches
is learn to see things through God's eyes.
God is with you and you are in God.
That gift of merciful grace makes it possible
to see things from God's perspective and act accordingly.
As our text suggests this morning,
those actions are best shaped by rejoicing in God's goodness,
praying without ceasing for more of it,
and giving thanks for what you can find of it in all circumstances.

Paul is also constantly reminding his readers
that this perspective and these possibilities
are gifts from God.
We will see goodness most clearly
and contribute to it most powerfully
when we recognize the source of the gift
and respond with deep gratitude.
It's that rhythm we've often explored together
of God's grace and our gratitude.
It's the classic jazz dynamic of call and response.

It's in a later letter,
Galatians to be specific,
that Paul outlines his understanding of goodness most clearly.
These attitudes and behaviours compose
the way God made us to flourish.

Here's the way Eugene Peterson in *The Message* translated Paul's understanding of goodness in Galatians 5:22-23:

*... [the Spirit] brings gifts into our lives,
much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard,
things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity.
We develop a willingness to stick with things,
a sense of compassion in the heart,
and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people.
We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments,
not needing to force our way in life,
able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.*

To see this way and to act this way is to do good.
We may be surrounded by evil.
We may be beset by evil.
We may think we are filled with evil.
But Paul witness is,
Paul's conviction is,
that we are surrounded by, nourished by, and filled with
a good that is more powerful than evil,
a love that casts out our fear of evil.

I'm mentioned in the opening moments of this sermon
that part of the goodness that God gives us
is God's help in removing the barriers
that we constantly put up to distance ourselves from this goodness.

I want to come back to that odd statement
and explore it a bit more deeply.

At some level, I suspect, most, if not all, of us
feel that we deserve to be surrounded by, beset by, and filled with evil.
We have been raised to be acutely aware of what we lack,
of the bad that we are and do,
of the failures we are responsible for.
Because we are evil, we deserve evil.
Paul might very well have harboured those feelings,
given his past of hatred and violence.

One of the greatest barriers I experience
to finding and expressing the goodness that God gives
is the difficulty I have in accepting and offering forgiveness,
especially forgiveness of myself.

Daniel and I were talking about forgiveness
the last time we had lunch together,
as I was memorizing and pondering the text for today.
I am always intrigued by how the Spirit
brings the most provocative ideas together at just the right time.
I had not put 'forgiveness' into the mix
while thinking about good and evil.
But it's crucial in appreciating Paul's wisdom.
Nothing we have or will read this year
would have been written
without the power of forgiveness.

As I've come to see it at this point,
our unwillingness to forgive,
our desperate clinging to outrage,
is the greatest barrier to doing good in God's world.
It keeps us stuck in evil,
makes us co-conspirators in doing evil.

One of my habits when I'm trying to make sense of something like this
is to go to a range of my favourite writers about the Christian faith
and hear what they have to say.
Here's what I found in the writings of Anne Lamott:

Forgiveness means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back. You're done. It doesn't necessarily mean that you want to have lunch with the person. If you keep hitting back, you stay trapped in the nightmare...

Rejoicing, prayer, and gratitude get you out of the nightmare.
The gifts of the Spirit lift you out of the depression and despair.
The power of evil withers in the face of forgiveness.

Now, let's be clear and honest with each other.
This is not easy.
It always requires God's gracious and merciful support.
But it is powerful and it does work.
It's one of the main reasons
I've started to us Paul's words in Ephesians
to end my sermon each week.

Listen carefully for Paul's affirmation of the goodness of God's power:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:20-21)