

“Good for Something”

June 6, 2010

Galatians 1:11-24

People say good bye in many different ways. See ya. Catch you later. Take care of yourself. Love you. All good words that wish you well and express the hope of meeting again. But, then, there are the bossy words that your parents like to throw out when they are telling you good-bye. Behave. Be smart. Stay out of trouble. When my sister and I were growing up, every time we closed the door behind us as we left to catch the school bus, we always heard: be good! We just looked at each other and rolled our eyes – all we were hoping for as the sibling social misfits of the year was to survive one more day of school and one more bus ride without getting beaten up or having our pants set on fire, and our parents? Well, they had higher hopes for our days. They were calling us to something greater. They were literally calling us to think about goodness, to imagine a way of life that soars above those bus rides and leaves this world a little bit better. Be good, they told us – when that was the farthest thing from our minds.

But, I have learned that the call to goodness does not end when you move out of the house. Your parents will always tell you to be good no matter how old you are. And, if that is not annoying enough, sometimes God even pipes up. Calls to us. God certainly called to Paul – knocked him flat actually – and we get a little nod to that calling in our scripture – *but when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace*. Just because those words are printed in a letter does not mean that that calling does not come for us. As the theme for our partners in the United Church of Christ says: God is still speaking.

Every morning as we shut the door behind us on the way to class, on the way to school, on the way to a doctor’s appointment, on the way to the ball game, on the way to the office or the job - in the midst of all of our very important activities – God still calls. Poking a hole in all the stuff we put between us and God so as not to hear. God calls - telling us there are more important things than our fascination with what others think about us, or how well we are measuring up, or our worries about having enough money and how our lives will all turn out. Across all of our distractions and preoccupations, God gives us a higher calling –be good!

It’s something to ponder on this Sunday as we give attention to our high school graduates. It is the end of an era for both of them and their families, so today, after this service, we will go into the fellowship hall to share a meal and we will be sorely tempted to ask our two graduates, Katie and Nina, LOTS of questions. We are going to be tempted to ask them about their career goals, their boyfriends or potential boyfriends, their colleges, their majors. That’s all well and good. Many of you have known Katie and Nina since they were little, so it is natural that you want to know what they plan to DO in college and in their lives.

But, the work of God this morning is to ask a different question – one that we are ALL challenged to answer every day. What kind of person are you going to be? It is not only about what you are going to DO with your life...but who are you going to become? That’s a question to answer no matter if you are 18 or 82 – not just what kind of tasks will fill up my day, but what kind of person am I going to be. To what shall I devote my life? THIS question is a question that gets at a lot of things – who we love, and how and why; how we spend our money; and the risks we are willing to take or not take for each other’s well-being. The great theologian Walter Brueggemann puts it this way, “Vocation is begun in the moments when we find our purpose for being in the world is related to the purposes of God.”

It is, you know. Every person in this sanctuary exists because God has something in mind – something good. For Paul, it was to proclaim Jesus Christ to the Gentiles – a group of people who never would have been welcome at the traditional religious tables – they were too unclean, too unfit, too unworthy - too different to be welcome. Paul was sent out to bring the great Gospel message to THOSE people. So, when Paul said his good-byes and went out to be good, that meant stepping into the hard work of building friendships and fellowship with a group of people who made him uncomfortable and a group of people that he used to ostracize and hurt. But, God knew Paul's potential, and God called him to something better – something good.

That is the thing about God. We can't hide from him. He knows our potential, and we can't disguise it. We can't get away with just saying, "Well, I wish I were different, but that's the way I am. That's the way I was raised. That's just how I feel." It's like trying to lie to your own mother – it just doesn't work. God knows our potential. And, it is good. I would guess that most of us would say that we want to be good people. We want our lives to have substance and goodness, but those seem like such vague and boring ideals. How will we know? What is goodness? How do you know when you are living the good life?

As Americans, we associate the good life with things like wealth, winning sports teams. Fast cars – BIG cars. The most friends. Influence and power – the ability to get our way, large houses – and really, really white teeth! That's the American way. I'm not sure that the popular Christian way is any nobler. As Christians, if you read letters to the editor, we sometimes associate good living with our ability to keep rules, the stands that we take without regard to their effect on others ...but, come on! Is that ALL Jesus has in store for us? A big, fat paycheck, a big, fat house, and a big fat rule book that lets us know when everybody else is wrong?

Life is meant to be so much more. Phillip Kenneson wrote a wonderful book called "Life on the Vine." He argues that, in their purest form, the values we hope to live as Christian, like goodness, have something in common: other directedness. You see, because Christ is in us, we ARE quite capable of deep communion with God and one another. But, to get there, we must take the focus off of ourselves and our pettiness – Christians seem to specialize in pettiness – and put the focus on somebody else, ANYBODY else, for a change. That is the only safe way to go about it, because our notions of goodness can be corrupt without our even knowing it - the best way to make sure that we are chasing God's goodness and not our personal agenda is to put our attention every day on somebody other than ourselves.

Let me give you an example that is happening on the other side of the world. I'm sure you all read that the Israeli navy boarded 10 small ships carrying humanitarian aid to Palestinians. It got out of control – 9 people were killed and hundreds were wounded. Yet, this morning – before dawn – a group of Israeli women got up and made their way to border patrol checkpoints – to stand all day in the blistering sun. These Israeli women stand next to the Israeli border guards NOT as their allies – and this just gives me chills - but as protectors of the Palestinian women whom those Israeli guards will search...every day. Can you imagine that? This group of Israeli women keeps watch in the desert – to ensure the dignity and the well-being of their so called enemies. Machsom Watch is the name of the organization if you want to google it. It began in response to a speech that these ladies heard detailing the abuses and unspeakable indignities that their enemies, or is that their sisters, were put through at the checkpoints. The Israeli women decided – we can do good here. Since our leaders seem incapable of making peace, we will seek peace. Enough is enough. So, this very moment, while we worship, as we breathe in and breathe out the celebration of this day – those Israeli women are standing watch in the dessert...

Not one of them is famous or rich – none have big houses or big cars. Are they living the good life? Look at the news this week. Is their work for peace successful?

That's the problem with goodness. It can seem pointless which means that when you seek to be good, you may be taken for a fool. Like those Israeli women seeking peace by protecting the bodies of Palestinian women – just a small, small drop of goodness in the violent Middle East. But, you know, Jesus was profoundly preoccupied with the small things -whether it was a mustard seed or Zacchaeus, Jesus was not a super-sized kind of guy. And, then there is God. God is more preoccupied than Jesus when it comes to the small. When God wanted to change the world, an INFANT appeared! I promise you, graduates, your parents remember the day you were born as they held you and rocked you – just an infant – in their arms and YOU changed their worlds. Their prayers were filled with the hope of good things for you. Goodness. They had in mind for you: goodness.

Paul gives us a clue as to how we know when we are getting there. He gives a little history. He says that he used to be far more spiritually mature and enlightened than others. *I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age...* But, then God got a hold of him – as did grace – and he realized that he had been carrying an incomplete message, one based on what built him up to be big instead of what built God up. So, he stopped what he was doing – did a complete about face – and began to proclaim the gospel to EVERYbody. He lived it. And, here's the clue to your proficiency in living the good life. Paul says, "And they glorified God because of me." That is good. That is very good.

Our lives are meant to be good for something. Our lives are meant to create good and to glorify God. And, Paul's observation – and they glorified God because of me – is a good measuring stick for us – whether we are headed to college or headed into the daily grind. When you come to the end of each day, is anybody glorifying God because of you? Is anybody whispering a prayer of thanks to God because of you? Does anybody feel as though they know Jesus a little better because of you? It does not take lots of resources – it's the small things. It takes a willing heart to find your purpose in God's plan to redeem the world. It takes prayer. It takes worship. It takes fellowship with other believers, and it takes a mind that is still foolish enough to believe that these small things matter.

You are the ones. You are the voice God is counting on. You. And, you. And you. And, even me. We are all the class of 2010 sent to share the message. As your pastor, it is my prayer that this very week, this very summer, this very year – whenever this body leaves this building and heads out into the world – they will glorify Christ because of us. So, go. And, be good.