

“Christian Virtue: Predicament and Promise”

Date: July 12, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Virtue series

Texts: Galatians 5:16-25; Romans 7:15-25a

Themes: Good and evil, ethics, spiritual formation, values, virtue

This morning we’re beginning a new sermon series on the topic of Christian virtue. What does it mean to be a good person? How do we become good people, and why is it so hard. Over the next several weeks we’ll be examining various Christian virtues in an attempt to better understand what it means to be good, righteous, holy, or whatever term you prefer to use.

At the outset, we’ve got a problem though. Inside each of us there is a tug of war going on, a struggle for our soul, a battle between good and evil. Most people are both attracted to and repelled by the idea of being virtuous. Which of us truly wants to be a saint? As a kid in school it wasn’t cool to be a “goody-two shoes” ‘People who never break any rules never get to have any fun;’ it was thought.

And yet, most of us don’t want to be really bad people. So we strive to be *decent* people. We allow ourselves to have certain vices, certain bad habits, but overall we consider ourselves “good people.”

Our society as a whole has been going through a revolution in thinking about what it considers right and wrong. We seem to be moving in the direction of moral relativism, where every person decides for himself or herself what is right or wrong. Nobody wants or likes to be told how they should live their lives. We have taken personal freedom to an extreme.

As Christians though, we recognize that God is our Creator and through the Bible and through the teachings of the Church, God has given

us certain laws and commandments that we are expected to live by. As Christians we strive to keep God's commandments, to a point.

But inside there is a real struggle that takes place. Even when we *want* to be good people, we don't always get it right. Sometimes we even act against our own better judgment, and we find ourselves doing and saying things that surprise even ourselves. Unfortunately, if we keep doing those things they become habits, and then we don't feel bad about doing what we once considered wrong.

As Christians, as people who love and follow Jesus, we want to resolve this inner conflict, and so it's important to remember *whose* we are. We belong to God who created us and declared "*You are good.*" Some-where along the way, though, something happened to that good self, and we became estranged from God, not always knowing right from wrong, and sometimes not even wanting to do the right thing.

God created us, and at the core of who we are there is a good person. And yet, our freedom to choose has always remained. God didn't make us puppets. We are always free to choose the *good self*, the self God created us to be, or to become captive to the evil that is around us.

That's our predicament. Now, how do we become good people? And how do we help others to become good people and to make good choices? Some say it's impossible. But as people of faith we know differently. It's not always easy, but it is possible. It is possible because God has not abandoned us.

God is constantly seeking to be in relationship with each of us, even from the very moment we first turned away. In seeking to be in relationship with us, God offers us the tools we need to turn away from the bad, the wrong or the evil, and to turn toward our created purpose – goodness.

Now, God wants each of us to recognize that we belong to God. God wants us to freely choose to be in relationship with Him, just as God freely decided to create us in the first place. But, God gives us a choice. We are always free to choose to be the good person God created us to be, or to go in another direction.

But even this turning is not something God expects us to do on our own. God offers us grace to help us even in our choosing. The foundation of our hope is Jesus Christ, who in his death and resurrection has conquered the power of evil in the world.

God gives us His grace which is more powerful than sin and evil. As we seek to resolve the struggle within us, this is where we begin – with God's grace. First, God offers us justifying grace, the experience of getting right with God. It is the healing, redemptive love of God which forgives our sin and restores our broken relationship.

Second, God offers us sanctifying grace – this is the work which God does in us. Sanctifying grace is the power of God to choose the good, to choose the right, to choose love, so that we can become more like Christ himself. Sanctification, becoming a good person, becoming holy, is a life-long process, as we allow the Holy Spirit to form our character and to shape our soul.

So, as we enter the contest between good and evil, it is important to remember that we are armed with the power of God's grace. We don't strive to be good on our own; we turn to God for help. He has the power. It is the power of the cross; it is the power of the empty tomb. It is the power which has already won the victory. It remains only for us to claim that victory in the everyday living of our lives. That is the promise.

And yet, we must participate in the process. Becoming a good person is not something that God does to us – instantly zapping us and making us good and holy. We have to practice being good; we have to practice the virtues until they become a habit – then we do the right thing simply because that’s what we do; we don’t have to think about it, we just do it.

And so, it’s a paradox. On the one hand, virtues are a gift from God. And on the other hand, goodness is something we have to work at. In the coming weeks we’re going to be talking about the seven cardinal virtues that the church has long recognized as the foundation for a virtuous life.

We’ll take a look at wisdom, courage, justice, temperance, faith, hope and love. Each of these, in a sense, is a gift; they are expressions of God’s work in our lives. As gifts of grace, they are indications of God’s goodness in our lives. Because they are gifts of grace, they are also gifts of power. The virtues are evidence of God’s power of goodness working inside us.

So, on the one hand we need to remember that virtues are not simply moral skills that we attempt to master. Rather, they are God’s gifts of grace to us. As much as we want to have these qualities in our life, we cannot depend on our own resources to make that happen. Rather we have the power of God’s grace to create, and guide and strengthen us.

On the other hand, though, it is equally true that virtues are the result of habit. A habit is the fruit of repetition. The more we repeat a certain act, the more it becomes ingrained in us to do it; so that eventually we do it without even thinking about it.

While God’s power in the virtues is essential, it will not be effective in our lives unless we are able to channel that power through disciplined practice. Moral development is much like a runner in training. God may have blessed the runner with the talent and the power to run. But she or he

will not be able to compete successfully without hours of dedicated practice and training.

We have the power to be good people; it is a gift of grace from God. But we will not be successful unless we devote ourselves to diligent rehearsal; doing good and virtuous things over and over again. Someone has once put it this way in the 12-Step recovery program of AA: “Without God, I can’t; without me, God won’t.”

So where do we begin? How do we begin the process of moral development, of training in righteousness? At the most basic level we each must begin with moral sincerity. We must truly want to be good. For some people that might mean asking God to help us *want* to be good.

At another level, we start where we are. We must ask for and accept the forgiveness which God offers us, so that we can be free from the guilt of our past. For some, it means starting over again. For others, it is part of an ongoing spiritual journey, a practice that occurs over and over again.

So what about it? Do you feel the call of God on your life? Do you feel the pull of the Holy Spirit creating a desire to be good, to be better, and to be all that God has called you to be?

I think the worst that could happen to us is that we become so complacent we settle for less than what God wants to offer us. So I pray that God will cause you a holy unrest, so that you will seek more of God’s gifts of grace – to become the woman or the man God wants you to be.

May it be so. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *The Workbook on Virtues and the Fruit of the Spirit*, by Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Dunnam Reisman, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998; pp. 7-24.