

THE GOOD SHALL NOT BE LOST

A Sermon Preached by
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Texts: Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

I learned a new term the other day: *functional ambivalent*. It refers to a practical piece of conventional wisdom which is basically counterintuitive; that is, on its surface it seems irrational, nonsense. One example of a functional ambivalent is this modern proverb: *no good deed goes unpunished*. It is a statement that has been variously attributed to financier John P. Grier, banker Andrew W. Mellon, writer Clare Booth Luce, and playwright Oscar Wilde.

Whoever first coined the phrase, on its surface, it doesn't appear to make any sense at all. After all, doing good deeds, being compassionate and helpful, rendering aid when aid is needed, going out of one's way to be generous and kind, exercising forbearance and forgiveness, activist loving; all these activities of the human creature are laudable and it seems illogical to suggest that any of them would provoke ill will or punishment.

But examples abound. I read an account of a 15-year-old high school student in California, Amanda Rouse, who became sick on her school bus on the way to school. She was so ill she decided simply not to get off at her school, to stay on the bus as it went on another route to pick up elementary school children, knowing that the bus would pass close by her house and she could then get off and return home. During this ride, the bus driver took a turn too sharply and fell out of her seat, hitting her head. The bus, now driverless, careened back and forth, and would have crashed had Amanda Rouse not jumped into the driver's seat, applied the brakes, and brought the bus to a stop.

Now, you'd think Amanda would have been lauded for her quick thinking and coolness under pressure which prevented injury or perhaps loss of life to several elementary age children, the bus driver, and herself. But no. Because she had not gone into the high school, filled out the proper forms, and followed the standard procedures for being sent home from school ill, Amanda was declared truant and given a lengthy detention for cutting class.

Here's another illustration. We have all heard of the legal difficulties so-called "Good Samaritans" have encountered over the last decade or so. Persons who have attempted to render assistance in emergency situations have actually been sued, most often by the very people they have tried to help. Now Good Samaritan laws have been passed throughout the nation, but there are caveats. In Illinois, people who stop to render first aid to accident victims or others who are in some kind of medical distress are protected from lawsuit. But here's the catch: only those

persons who have taken a certified course in first aid, or who are off-duty emergency medical technicians, are protected. So, if you encounter someone bleeding by the side of the road, the Parable of the Good Samaritan notwithstanding, you'd better think twice.

A last example. Some years ago, New York Police instituted 'Operation Lucky Bag,' a sting operation which involved leaving purses, shopping bags, wallets, and other valuables lying around in public places as though they were left behind, then arresting persons who picked up these articles and walked away. There were various items of value left in these parcels, and if you were unlucky enough to have picked up one which contained, say, a credit card, you were liable to be charged with a felony. Of the first 220 arrests in this program, 100 were people with prior arrest records, but the other 120 people had no prior police records and claimed they had picked up the items with intent to return them. *No good deed goes unpunished.*

As senseless as it sounds we have all experienced examples of this proverb, and have probably verbally invoked it when we have received negative response from something we did that we thought was good, or helpful, or compassionate, or was generated at the very least from good intentions. Of course, that brings to mind another functional ambivalent: *the road to hell is paved with good intentions*, an aphorism originally attributed to a Christian saint, Bernard of Clairveaux.

Punished for doing good. Good intentions paving the road to hell. It would seem like Christians specifically or any persons simply wanting to do good in general have moved through to the other side of the looking glass where everything is backward. Good deeds in our world are certainly not absent, thank God, but all too often they seem to come with a price tag, or they are hidden amid all the mischief and suspicion and greed and evil which coexist with them, or they are so legally and socially discouraged that people become more and more reluctant to do good.

This, I think, is precisely the situation which is addressed in Jesus' parable of the Wheat and the Tares, read just a few minutes ago. A farmer sows his field with wheat seeds. But an enemy comes during the night to sow weeds among the wheat. As the plants begin to grow the mischief is discovered: the weeds are growing among the wheat so closely that pulling out or cutting down the weeds might damage the wheat plants. The farmer instructs his servants to let both plants grow side by side, and when the time comes for the harvest, they can separate the bad from the good, and throw the bad away.

This parable was undoubtedly conceived and shared in a socio/cultural environment not unlike ours in the sense that there was present a frustrating and discouraging mixture of good and evil, of compassion and injustice, of faithfulness and apostasy. Those who were trying to live lives according to the Law and in proximity with what they understood to be good motives, were no doubt discouraged that in this world that God had made there was to be seen so much sin and evil competing with their goodness, so many instances of God's commands being ignored and frustrated, sometimes to the degree that the good wasn't even noticeable, was canceled out, or overwhelmed by the sheer volume and strength of the evil.

The conclusion of the parable, however, is clear: the good shall not be lost. It may be hidden for a time, it may never be fully noticed in the world, but God will not overlook it. The good, in its

many expressions of kindness, creativity, affirmation of life, forgiveness, faithful obedience to God and love, will always produce good fruit in this checkered world, will contribute to the healing of the world's wounds, will honor God in ways perhaps not easily visible to those who do the good; but the good will still make a difference in the world, though perhaps not in splashy, high relief, newsworthy ways.

St. Paul approaches the same theme but with a different metaphor. He writes, in the Epistle to the Romans:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation . . . itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains . . .

Paul describes the suffering and persecution which was being endured by the early church, whose adherents were once described by a Gentile observer: "See these Christians, how they love one another!"; and though they were only being zealous in doing good and loving acts, they experienced persecution in a number of different ways for their belief in Jesus as Lord, and Paul describes all these sufferings as but the pangs of childbirth, painful in the moment but eventually to give way to the emergence of something new and wonderful and amazingly good.

The wheat within the weeds. The potential for the miracle of new life even in the midst of suffering and fear and evil and death. Good, present and inevitably enduring even though appearing to be lost and weak among those life events and circumstances which by almost all observations and indications appear indomitable and irresistibly overwhelming.

But Jesus' parable of the Wheat and the Tares affirms that God will not allow the good to be lost, because God does not ignore or overlook the good. God knows how to define and recognize those deeds, and words, and yes, even intentions, which are good because they are redemptive in the world. They are not exercised towards selfish ends, they do not contribute to injustice and suffering, they do not participate in corruption, they point beyond themselves to the goodness of Creation, they are ongoing reflections of God's creative hand in the world that God created to be good.

This is because that which is good in human action and interaction, is almost always generated from love, and God recognizes and knows love, for God is love, and every time, for whatever reason and no matter the circumstance, when love is exercised, the goodness of God is experienced. Writes the author of the Epistle of First John:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7-7,12b)

What better example of the good not being lost in our world than what we do today? Two new lives, conceived in love, born in love, being raised in love, and now brought into this family of faith to remind us of God's enduring love for humanity, these two new lives will today receive Baptism, the sacrament of inclusion, the sacrament of God's embrace within the Body of Christ, the sacrament of God's good gift of Spirit within this worldly life. When we baptize Luke Spencer Taylor and Ryan William Taylor this morning we are doing a good thing. Amidst all the weeds and non-good that may be out there in that world, in here we are planting the seeds of something good, and loving, and enduring; and in doing so we renew our commitment as disciples of Jesus Christ to stand tall in doing good, to stand against evil, to stand for the things which make for justice and peace and compassion and forgiveness. In the words of St. Paul to the church in Rome:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in
showing honor. (Rom 12:9-10)

“Do-Gooders” has always been a term of derision and scorn in my experience. It is the term employed by the weeds to draw attention away from the wheat. But God is not fooled. The good that we do and that we are called to do is God's good work through us. And that good shall never be lost.

AMEN.