

Psalm 23
Matthew 1:18-25
Acts 11:19-24

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
August 14, 2022

The Fruit of Goodness

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm today is the most familiar and most beloved of all the psalms. Here God is seen as a Good Shepherd. Listen to these words from Psalm 23...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson today we have an example of a man who was not only righteous, but also good. That's Joseph, in his dealing with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Listen to these words from Matthew 1:18-25...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In the book of Acts, Luke speaks of a good man, who was full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. That man was Barnabas, who undertook missionary journeys with the Apostle Paul. Listen to these words from Acts 11:19-24...

Sermon

In our series of sermons on the fruits of the Spirit, as listed by Paul in Galatians 5, we've heard about: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, and Kindness. Today we hear about Goodness. Paul saw a slight difference between righteousness and goodness, as noted in his Letter to the Romans:

Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. (Rm. 5:7)

Joseph is an example of such a person. In our Gospel Lesson we read that Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. Now, a Jewish marriage involved three basic steps. First, the two families agreed to the union. Second, a public announcement was made. At this point, the couple was “pledged” to be married. We can compare this step to an engagement today. However, the arrangement could only be broken by death or divorce, even though intimacy was not permitted. Then thirdly, the couple married and began living together. Because Mary and Joseph were engaged, her apparent unfaithfulness, seen in the fact that she was found to be with child, brought with it a severe social stigma. And according to Jewish law, Joseph had a right to divorce her. And the Jewish authorities could even have had her stoned to death (Dt. 22:23-24).

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, or as one version (NIV) says, “Joseph her husband was faithful to the law.” However, and here is the point, Joseph was more than just righteous; he was good. Why so? Because he was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace. Therefore, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Of course, Joseph did not know about the true father of the child that Mary had conceived, until an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and revealed that the child was from the Holy Spirit. At that, Joseph took Mary to be his wife. Joseph—a good man.

Next, our reading from the eleventh chapter of Acts speaks of Barnabas as a good man—“for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (v. 24). Barnabas provides an example of how to help new Christians. He demonstrated faith; he ministered joyfully with kindness and encouragement; and he taught lessons about God.

Interestingly, this good man was born with the name “Joses,” a Greek variant of the name, “Joseph.” Later on, when recounting the story of how he sold his possessions to give money to the apostles in Jerusalem, Luke calls him “Barnabas,” which is Greek for “son of

encouragement.” In Acts 9 we read that when fearful disciples refused to accept Paul, it was Barnabas who came to his defense. And thanks to his testimony, Paul was then able to “stay with them and moved freely about in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord” (v. 27).

Clearly, Barnabas was a source of encouragement to Paul. It’s been well-said that we all need a Barnabas in our lives. No matter how long we have been a Christian; no matter how active we are in the church; no matter how much we pray and read the Bible; there are times when we all can use a word of encouragement. And one way we can bear the fruit of goodness is by offering such encouragement to others. That doesn’t mean we have to be a minister or an officer of the church. It doesn’t mean we have to be in the limelight of the church. It doesn’t mean we have to be an official member of the congregation or have a certain level of education. You and I can bear the fruit of goodness to someone this week. We all need a Barnabas.

It’s in the fifth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Galatians that we read of the fruit of the Spirit (vv. 22-23). In the next and final chapter we read about reaping what we sow and not growing weary in well-doing. Then this:

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith (Gal. 6:10).

John Calvin said that we are to do good to all, for they, like us, are created in the image of God. One way we do good to all here at Midway is through our various mission endeavors. We don’t inquire about people’s background, worthiness, or beliefs.

But Paul says we are especially to do good to those of the family of faith. And here at Midway we answer that call in various ways, particularly through our Parish Care Team and our Quiet Fund. All of us can pray for a member going through a difficult time. We can offer an

encouraging word; send a card; make a phone call or visit. Let us do good to all, especially to those of the family of faith.

Then finally in our Psalm today, we read of God, the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep. In John's Gospel we find the same imagery in which Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (10:1-21). As the song says, "God is good, all the time. And, all the time, God is good." And the psalmist declares that God's goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life.

There's an old story of the two ministers who went on vacation in the Welch hills:

High on the moors they met a shepherd lad and stopped to chat with him. They found the boy had never been to school and that he knew nothing at all of the Christian faith. The two ministers read to him the 23rd Psalm, and to help him find a personal faith they got him to repeat the words, "The Lords is *my* shepherd."

Next year the ministers were back in the same hills. This time they called at a cottage to ask for a drink of milk. The lady noticed them looking at a photograph of a lad on the mantelpiece. "Yes," she said, "that was my son. He died last winter in a snowstorm while tending his sheep. But there was a curious thing about him. His right hand was clutching the fourth finger of his left hand." "Well now," one of the ministers replied, "we met your boy last year. In fact, since he was a shepherd boy, we taught him to repeat the first line of the 23rd Psalm, and we told him whenever he said it to himself, to pause at the fourth word ["my"], and think, "'This psalm was meant for me.'"

Well surely this psalm is meant for us, and it can be a blessing to us today, and for the rest of our lives. Especially when we walk through the dark valley of serious illness and suffering, of grief, of rejection, and even the experience of death itself. The retired Presbyterian pastor, Richard Morgan, said,

Psalm 23 remains the best loved of all biblical passages. The living have lived by it, the dying have died by it; it is the priceless possession of the people of God, and never fails to speak to wherever people are on the journey of life.

In an article in *Table Talk Magazine*, Steven Lawson tells a story about Dwight L. Moody, the well-known evangelist of the 19th century. Moody gave up his lucrative boot and shoe business to devote his life to revivalism. Lawson says that once Moody was approached by a woman who needed counseling. Two men, she claimed, were following her. Whenever she stepped onto the city trolley, they stepped onto it behind her. When she stepped off, they stepped off. With a nervous twitch in her neck, she insisted that she had even been followed to his office by these very two men.

Moody could easily detect that this precious woman was suffering from a mental delusion. There was no one following her. But to put her at ease, he told her, “Those two men following you are David’s men. Their names are Goodness and Mercy.” He turned in the Bible to Psalm 23:6 and showed her, “Surely goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life.” She was relieved and exclaimed, “that is wonderful. I have always wondered what their names are.” The woman left that day with peace of mind, comforted to know that it was goodness and mercy that were following her.

Lawson says that the psalm affirms a close and inseparable relationship between the Good Shepherd and his sheep. Verse 6 reinforces this truth and makes it abundantly clear. David begins the verse by underscoring the certainty of this indissoluble union: “*Surely* goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” No matter how dark the valley, regardless of how deep the canyon, *surely* the goodness and mercy of the Good Shepherd belong to the sheep.

Not only “goodness,” but also “mercy.” This is the unconditional love of the Good Shepherd for his flock. Even when we are faithless, he remains faithful to us. Jesus

demonstrates this love in his laying down his life for us and our salvation. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rm. 5:8).

The Hebrew verb translated “follow” pictures the two virtues—goodness and mercy—as actively pursuing David. It can be said that these twin components of divine love are like two sheepdogs that help the shepherd corral his flock. They shadow the flock in order to guide them in the right direction. When the sheep go astray, the dogs bring them back. When the sheep slow down, the dogs spur them on. So it is with goodness and mercy. They are constantly bringing us closer to the Good Shepherd.

My friends, as believers in Jesus Christ, you and I can trust that the goodness and mercy of God are following our every step. We can be confident and comforted, believing that every day of our lives, these two friends of David are with us day by day throughout our life’s journey.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.