

9.28.08

Theme: Do God

Title: "Good to Go"

Texts: Micah 6:6-8 & Matthew 5: 3-12

Wasted Brain Cells

It's kind of scary when I consider what I've devoted some of my brain cells to. Advertising jingles and slogans, for example. I don't know how many I've got stored up here, most planted in my cranium during my childhood. These slogans are very effective. They forge an unbreakable link between a phrase and a brand or product:

- plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh, what a relief it is (Peptol Bismol)
- I wish I was an Oscar Meyer Wiener (Oscar Meyer)
- It's the real thing (Coke)
- You deserve a break today (McDonalds)

Wesley's Slogan

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and the author of the Three Simple Rules we've been studying, wasn't a bad sloganeer himself. He certainly hoped to forge a strong link these simple rules and the people called Methodists.

He especially wanted the phrase "do good" to be connected with us. When asked to describe the "character of a Methodist," Wesley responded by saying a Methodist:

does good unto all men; unto neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies: And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies, by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison; but much more does he labour to do good to their souls...

The good Wesley envisioned Methodists doing was holistic, blessing both body and soul.

Free From to Be Free For

This "doing good" sounds like a tall order and it is. And before we get our minds and hearts around what it involves, let's first be clear about what doing good doesn't involve.

It doesn't involve winning God's love by doing good.

Early in his life, Wesley got this point all wrong. He did good because he wanted to make himself worthy of God. He believed God demanded purified intentions and good deeds in exchange for love. So Wesley set out to make himself loveable.

So many of our human relationships work this way. If you want the boss to like you, improve your productivity. If you want the girl or the guy to notice you, make yourself attractive. If you want the teacher to give you a good grade, ace the exam.

Wesley approached his relationship with God in this way. And he found himself unable to make the grade. Just when he thought he'd improved his character enough to win God's heart, he'd discover some other flaw.

The truth was (and is), God loves us unconditionally. Not because of who we are or what we do, but because of who God is and what he's done for us through Jesus.

When Wesley finally realized this, he was set free from the burden of trying to make himself loveable and he was set free for the wonderful work of helping God do good in the world.

In Sync

So doing good is not about winning God's love. You are already loved by God unconditionally at this very moment. Perhaps you need to face that reality and accepted it. But you needn't do anything good for it to be so.

So what does "doing good" involve?

In the Beatitudes, Jesus tells his disciples "doing good" will lead to the deepest satisfactions. Those who practice righteousness, who show mercy, who work for peace will be blessed.

If we equate blessing with material reward, positive fame or easy circumstances, it's not hard to find counter-examples. Some times doing the right thing means passing by an opportunity to make a buck. Sometimes treating someone mercifully makes you vulnerable. Sometimes peacemakers wind up getting shot at figuratively and literally.

But Jesus called such "do gooders" blessed for different reasons. He said they were blessed because their lives were in sync with God. They were living just as they were made to live. Their lifestyle matched their God-given purpose.

An analogy: since gas prices spiked last year there's been a lot of talk about "hypermiling," that is driving your car at a speed which provides the best gas mileage. The perfect speed for your car depends on a number of factors: the aero-dynamic shape of your car, the load you're carrying, and your road/driving conditions. The "hypermiler" looks for the optimum speed to achieve the best possible gas mileage for a given car, believing that to drive much faster or much slower (though slow is usually more efficient than fast) puts you out of sync with your car's ideal functioning.

When we do the good Christ's asks us to do, and do as much of it as we can, we're operating at our "optimum speed." We're in sync with God's purpose for us and the universe. And it's a beautiful thing.

That's why when the Old Testament prophet answers the question, "what does the Lord require of you?" meaning, how do we know we're right or "in sync" with God's purposes and will, the answer is spelled out in terms of doing good:

- do justice
- love kindness
- walk humbling with God

As we said before, these things don't make us right with God. They don't win us God's love, but they do align us with God's purposes and enable us to experience the greatest joy we can know.

No One Where You Are

So what good can we do?

A few years ago I saw an episode of the old Star Trek series where a "transporter" malfunction allowed two people to be transported into the same space and time. They became one person, literally occupying the same space. Talk about "getting into someone's face."

Well, that's science fiction. The truth is no one can occupy the exact same space as you do. And I mean that to cover more than the basic Physics of the situation. You are unique. No one stands just where you do. Your circle of friends and family is unique. We may know many of the same people, but not in exactly the same way. And there are people in your "rolodex" who aren't in mine. You possess a "one-of-kind" entre into the lives of all sorts of people.

And no one has your particular set of gifts, skills and experiences. The God-given shape of your soul augmented by whatever additions and modifications life has brought to you, gives you unique leverage in the world. There are good deeds you are uniquely suited to carry out.

You may not know this, or may have forgotten it, or may actively disbelieve this, but God knows all about the good you are uniquely suited to do. Indeed, he fashioned you and planted you where you are to accomplish some good for his kingdom.

As Paul says in Ephesians, **"For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."**

God created you for a purpose: to be blessed and be a blessing.

Let's be specific. "Be specific" was the slogan of my 7th grade English teacher. I'm glad the brain cells containing that phrase still work.

What good are you equipped and asked to do by God?

As Much as You Can As You Go

Let me sketch an answer to that question in two parts:

First, do as much good as you can as you go about your everyday life. On most days, nothing heroic is required of us. Just simple acts of kindness, generosity and forgiveness done at home, in school and on the job for the people you work with, live with and bump into on an ordinary day.

The other day I saw a college student at Wegman's park his cart to one side of an aisle and step over to assist a petite older woman reach a box of cereal off a top shelf. Not only did he help her get the box down, but he took a minute to listen to her tell him why that cereal was her favorite. God only knows if that little exchange was the first conversation she'd enjoyed that day. God only knows.

Second, look for the good God is asking you to do in work that gives you great joy while meeting a great need in the world. Doing good should be enjoyable most days. It shouldn't be a burden or a killjoy for you.

This gets back to what we've been saying about how doing good puts us in sync with God. If you find joy and satisfaction in doing some good, you've probably found your "sweet spot." Keep at it, expand it maybe.

And if you've not found that sweet spot yet, don't give up. It's out there, waiting for you. Because, as Paul said, "**we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.**"