Sermon, October 13, 2024

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine

Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

Let's start with a challenging question this morning. Now you're going to have to trust me on this one. And I want you to close your eyes so you don't see how anyone else here is going to answer. So raise your hand if you think you are a good person. No peeking. It's a hard question to answer. If I answer yes do I seem like a narcisstic egotist but if I answer no does it make me look like a depraved ax-murderer? Keep your eyes closed and now a second question, "Is the person sitting next to you or in front of you a good person?". Now your answers are completely confidential but what I want you to even more ponder is what criteria you might use to make this assessment.

Author David Brooks wrote a column in the New York Times titled "The Moral Diet". Here is some of what he said about how we measure if we are good,

"People who live by the Good Person Construct try to balance their virtuous self-image with their selfish desires. They try to manage the moral plusses and minuses and keep their overall record in positive territory. In this construct, moral life is more like dieting: I give myself permission to have a few cookies because I had salads for lunch and dinner. I give myself permission to cheat a little because, when I look at my overall life, I see that I'm still a good person.

"The Good Person isn't shooting for perfection any more than most dieters are following their diet 100 percent. It's enough to be workably suboptimal, a tolerant, harmless sinner and a generally good guy. Obviously, though, there's a measurement problem. You can buy a weight scale to get an objective measure of your diet. But you can't buy a scale of virtues to put on the bathroom floor. And given our awesome capacities for rationalization and self-deception, most of us are going to measure ourselves leniently."

Our scriptures today feature three people who thought they met the "Hey I'm a good person" test: Job a law-observing Jew and benefactor, a rich young man who has kept all the commandments and the disciple Peter who has left everything to follow Jesus.

Job had been prosperous, many possessions, a family. And at that time of Judaism, it was thought that family and riches were signs of God's favor, of being blessed. It all was taken way. Job lost just about everything; his sheep, his oxen, his camels, his servants, and all of his sons and daughters His wife says, "Curse God and die". An encouraging message but when you are at the end of your rope perhaps it seems like the only way out. Job, however, refuses to do that.

As our first lesson from chapter 23 begins today, we discover that Job is still destitute. "Today also my complaint is bitter; [God's] hand is heavy despite my groaning," he says. It's been 20 chapters and nothing has changed in his situation. A few verses later he says,

If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

By the end of the chapter, with no relief in sight, Job adds that

God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;
If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!

Job has looked everywhere and has found no one to comfort him or relieve his despair. In fact, God has not responded in any way to Job's demand for answers. But Job is still at it, asking and searching; maybe because if he stops, then he'll have nothing left to live for.

Now contrast Job with the young man in today's gospel. He approaches Jesus in good faith: "What must I do?" Jesus gives a short answer, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

He was shocked because he considered his wealth an entitlement — a symbol not only of his worldly accomplishments, but also of God's favor. How terrible to be told that his best credential was a liability and a burden. How grievous to realize that God's kingdom was not custom designed for his ease — that he might not like it, or agree with its priorities, or find common cause with its inhabitants. And unlike Job he didn't keep the dialogue going. Could he have bartered, "Hey I'll sell the condo in Cancun but let me keep the Maserati"? But he didn't; he is the only person to completely refuse Jesus' invitation. No more dialogue- and we have no clue what happened to him.

And then there's Peter who with the others had given up a trade—perhaps a career—who had left their families behind to put Jesus and the Gospel first, who thought they were good people doing the right thing and following the right person and who are left a little gobsmacked.

Job, the rich young man, Peter - all left wondering, "what's the point of being good?" Perhaps we too have our questions today.

> *Why does such devastation like Hurricanes Helene and Milton completely wreck some people's lives and not others?*
> *Do I really have to give away my possessions?*
> *You mean the one who dies with the most toys doesn't win?*
> *What's in it for me? While we like Peter have not given everything away to follow you, many have devoted considerable time and treasure in their lives for the benefit of this church or others.*

As one of the best known lines in the letter to the Hebrews says, "The word of God is living and active, is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. We all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." Perhaps the idea of being laid bare before God is not a cheery one. The disciples in the gospel too were panicked, "Then who can be saved?" The answer Jesus gives, "for mortals it is impossible" meaning our moral calculus, whether the Good Person Construct or anything else, does not count. The good news, "for God all things are possible".

The only solution is, as our epistle advises, to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need". Job despite all of his misfortunes, continued the dialogue and, spoiler alert, comes to terms with God and his wealth is restored. The young man stays heartbroken, we don't know the end of his story. Peter and the others endure trials and tribulations but stay faithful to the end. For us, how we answered the "good person" question is relatively unimportant. Will our story end by staying faithful to the end by placing all our trust in God's never-failing mercy?