

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 3, March 3, 2013, dedicated to Heather, Katie, Matt, Abby and Alex – all world travelers, witnesses, seekers and deliverers of goodness and mercy, kindness and righteousness; with thanksgiving to God for each one of you and your ministries!

“Blessed Are the Meek and the Hungering for Righteousness”

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

***(Part IV of VIII in the Lenten Sermon Series
“Blessed Are You!”)***

If you ever have the opportunity to travel to Texas, keep going past San Antonio, and wind your way a little to the west - until you get back into the open roads. About 40 minutes out of town, watch for the places where the road winds and crosses back and forth over Rio Grande. Keep a look out on the right hand side of the road and take a turn at the roadside stand. You will know you are in the right place because you will see the dirt road off to the right. On the evenings of summer, when the temperatures are still above 105 in the shade, you will also see the pickup trucks winding along the country road.

You will know for sure you are on the right road when you see your road stops immediately at the river's edge – but it doesn't really end. Look across the water and you will see it picks up straight across from you. It took a minute, but then I realized the expectation was to drive through the water to get to the other side. I am from Florida. You do not ford rivers in trucks or cars. They sink in the mud.

But this road is in Texas. Just take a deep breath and go for it - even a rental car can drive through the low water crossing. I know this because after a brief pause, I eased forward. By the middle, I was like a little kid. I relaxed and opened the door and laughed out loud. Trust, all will be well. Follow the road on the other side.

When you hear the kids downstream at the church camp, you will know you have arrived. Only a few yards away you will find the gentle natural water slide . . . surrounded by small pools and eddy's that draw you in - don't drag you down and will leave you refreshed when it's time to get back to the world. It's a place of sun and shade, warmth and coolness.

Someone sent me to this place a dozen years ago . . . said if I was paying attention, I might even see Jesus there. I was skeptical and a little concerned. I didn't actually didn't want to see Jesus. I wanted an uneventful quiet place. Jesus makes things happen.

He goes to an ordinary wedding and turns old water into new wine. He wakes up from a nap one day after being rocked to sleep by the sounds of waves lapping at the side of the boat, then when the storm moves in, he commands the wind to stop. It all sounds scary. Jesus can be unnerving. When he's involved, there's always a chance things might happen we don't think we signed up for. I was *wandering* across Texas when I found this place. I was looking for easy.

I'm pretty sure the people who followed him up the hillside in this morning's passage had no way of knowing what they were getting themselves into the day they followed him out of town and up the mountain. Little did they know he was going to take up the posture of Moses, the man of God that came before him; little did they know they were not going to get away with lazy thinking or haphazard responses; little did they know that this incarnate presence of God was breaching all the space and time that had been neatly layered between heaven and earth.

They had no way of knowing ahead of time that this Torah-giver on Sinai, this new Moses, as Reinhold Niebuhr once described him, was the incarnate power of God. If they had, one thing is sure:

the invitation to be humbled they were about to encounter would have no equal here on earth. They had no way of knowing they were about to come face to face with the Christ and that he was about to bless them.

One thing we do know is that proclaiming the eight short sayings we know as the Beatitudes reshaped the character and destiny of followers. His words leap and splash across the river of time. They give a futuristic challenge and simultaneously call for a decision right here, right now. However, just because we hear something, does not always mean we automatically think it's a good thing. I have no doubt there were people who walked down both sides of the mountain that day debating the issues. Some were probably suggesting their own ideas were more balanced, others saying their old rabbi had a better idea how to invest everyone's time, talent and treasure, over this new guy. If we listen though, Jesus' voice can be heard. When we watch, we witness faint footprints in the sand on Sinai . . . heading directly toward Calvary.

It is undeniably challenging news to hear: let go of the shame and blame games; take care of each other; lift up the blessings of being part of the community of God; keep your eyes and heart focused on God and ask God where we are called to go and then do what we are called to do. It takes time to trust and learn. This is not easy to hear then or now. It is a theme that just will not let go.

In the book *Made For Goodness* by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho, they remind us that one of God's earliest tasks was creating us in the image of God's own being – a being of love and goodness. God's nature is our nature. Being made for goodness is the whole point of life. Goodness matters, it is instilled in us from the beginning. If you think about it very long, this notion pushes a lot of other things totally out of the park. Have you ever stopped to think about what this means – that you are good and therefore lovable?

When we humble ourselves before God, we have to leave this possibility open. So let's just get on with it today – God created you and I and declared us good. This means there is nothing either of us can do to earn God's love. All the shoulds and oughts drilled

into us are superficial. They will not lead us closer to God. God's love for us is already ours. It is a gift. Our task is to live out the sheer joy of it. It is for everyone – the good, the troubled, even the ones we label terrible. I was raised on “should,” as was my mother before her. She has recently died and I hope that now, in the fullness of God's presence, she is finally fully aware of how good she is and has always been.

The rain waters of God's goodness fall on the gardens of those who have lost their way and those who know the way. God is goodness and created and proclaimed us good. Sometimes we draw closer to allow ourselves to believe this and be humbled by it, choosing to live it out in positive ways. Other times we block the possibility. It tends to be easier to just believe we are sinful and then take and do what we want.

I learned goodness before I knew what to call it. I kept it at a safe distance. I assumed other people might be participating in good, but not that you are I were named and claimed by God as good. I learned its distortion first in a variety of ways.

I was sitting on the front porch one afternoon, watching our five year old neighbor David and my daughter Jeni play. (It was more decades ago that I care to claim from the pulpit today.) In my mind's eye I can also still see another little guy, Heath, from across the street, six houses down. He was walking toward us on the sidewalk on the other side of the street. They were all about four-foot-nothing tall, close to our Treble Choir this morning. Heath was as sweet natured as the other two. They had all baked cookies together the day before. David and Jeni called to him to come across and play. He hung his head down, shaking it gently back and forth and said, “No, I can't.”

They invited him again. I offered to cross over and walk him across the street as we moms usually did, but once again he shook his head sadly back and forth . . . and then it came out. With anguish, and his eyes to the ground, he shouted words I have never heard from a child before or since. “No, I can't. My dad said I can't play with a dirty __ __.” His words were harsh; his own sadness

overwhelming. It was more than clear the words of hatred he was spewing were not his own.

I've always felt certain that there was an inextricable connection between that afternoon and the swastika that was burned on the lawn on our side of the street, two doors down, in the middle of the night, on little David's front yard three day later. The police were unable to clearly identify the responsible party.

What I had witnessed in the daylight was the God-given-goodness of the children at play was suddenly in direct conflict with the hatred, ignorance and distortion of an adult. I saw the ashes a few mornings later. The sounds of laughter and tears of dismay all remain strong for me, and so I have a question for you. If I were to tell you they are with us in worship today and point out this father and son this morning; when everyone comes forward to participate in communion, what would you do?

I can tell you I already know. Some might want to know who they are, others hope they never knew. Either way, I believe you would humbly walk up the aisle with them and probably even silently pray for them; some even tempted to place a hand lightly on a shoulder. I believe that you would trust God loves them – as God has always loved them. Not because they have always done the right or best thing, but because they are God's creation of goodness and so are you. God loves us - - period.

I have come to this conclusion of you because you are here, in this open, affirming, encouraging congregation by choice and goodness. When it washes over us, it is humbling and easily shared with others. What we believe and do makes a world of difference. It makes the world different. Goodness leads us into righteousness – a life-long endeavor of decent, honorable choices and actions, if we allow it and seek to live into it.

Long ago and far away the friends of the lame man risked their own necks as they climbed up on the roof, somehow hoisted their paralytic friend and his mat up there with them and then lowered him precariously down through a hole in the roof, in hopes he could be healed by Jesus. Goodness and righteousness.

Zaccheus, tax-collecting, short of stature with the Roman guards, departed from his conniving ways to go on a marvelously child-like tree-climbing adventure - just to catch a glimpse of Jesus. In the end, he let go of his bondage to greedily taking what he wanted and was moved to make restitution instead. Goodness and righteousness.

And closer to home, Desmond and Mpho Tutu tell us about Mrs. Maphosela, the mother in Gugulethu who has welcomed twenty or more children at a time into her small three room house in South Africa as their parents have grown sick or died from HIV/AIDS. Some have been delivered to her as the parent was dying. Others have been brought to her by the church, after they were orphaned. In this three room, not three bedrooms, shanty, they move the kitchen table at night to make a place for the boys to sleep. She and the girls all sleep in the bedroom. One Sunday morning they didn't show up in church. A deacon went to their home after worship to see if they were alright. Mrs. Maphosela explained that since there were now so many, they weren't able to afford a taxi to church. From there on out, a deacon began going to the house after Sunday worship and bring worship to them at their home. Goodness and righteousness.

And still closer to home, on a different shore, centuries away from that day on Sinai, a banker remembered with me last week how he first began in the banking industry. He said his uncle told him he'd be good at it and it turns out he was. When I asked him what he liked about it, his smile made it clear he liked it even though he's been retired for years. He said it was because he got to take part in people's lives. "When they come to the bank," he said, "something was going on and a lot of the time they needed help to make things come out ok." He said it was just fun to get to be there for them. [Thank you Bill.] Goodness and righteousness.

The point of the stories is not to move us to guilt and shame. You and I are practicing letting go of that old notion. It is instead, to remind us every one of us can do something - one something at a time - to lift up the goodness that is within us. We can allow God's goodness working through us to become a series of right actions. If we block out the pain of the world, ignore it so we can have

everything we want even at the expense of others, we have lost sight of what is good and right. God calls us to be humble and just; kind and fair. God calls us to live into the goodness in which we have been created – in which everyone has been created. Even now we are being given an invitation to wholeness and joyful action that flows out of it.

How amazing it will be when no one sleeps on the streets because they have no shelter. How glorious it will be when no one dies from acts of violence or because they have no food. How earth-shaking it will be when each person here and those we will meet are all able to trust and believe they are good and have the freedom to choose to forgive – (including the person in the mirror) and move forward in actions of kindness. How life giving it will be when you and I begin to see ourselves as God sees us – to love ourselves and others as God loves us. In that day, you may be assured, goodness and righteousness will be at hand.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness - for they will be filled. Amen.