



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



God's Goodness

Text: Acts 9:32-43

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I've been ruminating about this sermon a great deal. I had chosen my text and named the sermon last month. Preaching about God's goodness two weeks after Easter is such a great concept. The problem is that the events of this past week have made many of us feel greatly separated from God's goodness.

At the point in Acts of the Apostles that we are looking at today it immediately follows Luke telling us that the church was growing and thriving and St. Paul was just getting started with his preaching. The scene changes and we have Peter perform two miracles; he heals a paralyzed person and raises a woman named Tabitha from the dead. It is an amazing demonstration of the power God has given people in the early Christian church and it is a magnificent demonstration of God's goodness.

God's goodness.

Years ago when I was a very young, very new minister one of my colleagues in town was having a far better life than I have ever had. Every time you would ask him how he was doing, how things were going, he'd say, "I am wonderful. This is the day that the Lord has made. How can we by anything but wonderful?"

My problem was I could think of some ways to be anything but wonderful. It's not that my life was bad, but not every day was a very good day and some days I felt wonderful and other days a lot less than wonderful.

God's goodness.

If we read the Gospels we read many stories of Jesus performing miracles and sharing God's goodness with people. We read about miracles performed by the apostles in Jesus's name and we encounter God's goodness. The problem is, at some point, if we are reasonably honest with ourselves and others, we sometimes miss or get mystified by God's goodness.

Of late the news has not been filled with stories of God's goodness.

This weekend we had dinner with some friends from our old church in Ohio. Their son's college baseball team was playing at Hanover College and we decided to meet up and spend some time together. Their son attends Bluffton University and was on the bus in Atlanta that was in the accident that killed seven people. In remembering that accident and in talking to them my heart was again broken by the tragedy.

Many people reeled when they heard Don Imus' comments of a few weeks ago. What he said was blatantly racist and, almost overlooked, blatantly sexist. Part of people's outrage was that he exposed the nasty fact of life that racism and sexism still impact our society. Whether you like Don Imus or not, or whether you agree with the price Don Imus has had to pay or not, he revealed to us that the subjects of racism and sexism are not dead but very much alive and people are still having a very difficult having rational and civil discussions about them.

But the news of this week was far, far worse.

Like so many people I have tried to make some sort of sense out of what happened. Janet graduated from Virginia Tech took classes in the building where the massacre took place and lived in the dorm where the first two murders were committed. In our home what took place at Virginia Tech has struck hard and deeply.

One of the police officers said that it all became too much when he was in a classroom, filled with slaughtered students, with their cell phones ringing and going unanswered. The students were being called by frightened and desperate parents hoping their child was okay. The police officer knew that there would be tremendous grief and hard break for those on the other end of the phone.

And then the pictures and the video of the killer. Maybe the less said, the better.

It was a horrible tragedy that reminds us that life is often filled with tragedy.

Perhaps the most eloquent words were spoken by the professor Nikki Giovanni when she put things into some sort of a perspective:

We do not understand this tragedy. We know we did nothing to deserve it, but neither does a child in Africa dying of AIDS, neither do the invisible children walking the night away to avoid being captured by the rogue army, neither does the baby elephant watching his community being devastated for ivory, neither does the Mexican child looking for fresh water, neither does the Appalachian infant killed in the middle of the night in his crib in the home his father built with his own hands being run over by a boulder because the land was destabilized. No one deserves a tragedy.

How can such a things happen? How can a good and loving God allow such things to happen?

It is a timeless and eternal question.

Job asked it. All sorts of terrible things had befallen him and he greatly lamented and wanted God to tell him why.

And God thundered back. Literally. And the answer was that if Job was God, Job would know the answer; and since Job wasn't God, there was no answer.

The Book of Job is one of my favorite books of the Bible and it is a book that very much reveals the awesomeness of God, but it is also frustrating because the one answer people really want goes unanswered.

Which brings us back to God's goodness.

People have always grappled with God's goodness and the presence of evil in the world.

Luke, in this passage from Acts speaks of two miracles. The first is when Peter heals a man Aeneas who had been paralyzed and was bedridden for eight years. It was a horrible fate to be paralyzed and, I'm sure, as Aeneas laid in his bed day after day he had to question God's goodness.

And then there was Tabitha who died. Tabitha, was a good woman. She helped the poor and was always doing good. Her death was a tragedy and a loss for those who knew her. How could God take such a good person from their midst?

And Peter raises her back to life.

Sometimes when we read the Bible it is easy to get the impression that somehow God was more involved in people's lives, that more amazing things were taking place. Sometimes we mistakenly believe that they may have had it better than we do.

Please take note that the richest person in all of Jerusalem at that time would have gladly changed lives with anyone sitting here today. Our lives in our day and age are significantly easier, significantly more comfortable, significantly better in so many ways than life was back then. The stories of God's goodness through the signs performed by Jesus and the apostles brought glimpses of hope to people whose lives often seemed hopeless.

That is, in so many ways, how God reminds us that God's goodness is around us. We see the goodness of God in little things. But we often have to be looking because those little things often come in odd packages.

A Dutch woman named Corrie Ten Boom's family hid a Jewish family in a hiding place in their home. They were betrayed by an informant and the family was taken to a concentration camp. Ironically, the Nazis never found the hiding place and the people they had been hiding were able to

escape.

Corrie Ten Boom said that one of the greatest blessings in life was an infestation of fleas. The barracks room where she was imprisoned was infested, badly, with fleas. But she said those fleas were a magnificent gift from God because none of the guards would enter into their barracks room so they were left alone.

It's sometimes little things.

But it's also God's presence.

We often, when there is horror around us, wonder where God is. The answer is that God is always present. And, in my heart, I believe that God's heart is the first to break in the midst of tragedy.

William Sloane Coffin, when he was the pastor of Riverside Church in New York City lost his son. His son had too much to drink and was driving on a dark and rainy night with a broken windshield wiper when he drove off a bridge into a river and drowned. It was a tragic, needless death.

Coffin said that he was upset when people put their arms around him and said that it was God's will.

Coffin said that it was not God's will that his son drank too many beers. It was not God's will that his son never bothered to have his windshield wiper replaced. It was not God's will that his son got into the driver's seat while he was drunk. Coffin said that his great solace and comfort came in believing that when God saw Coffin's son drown in the river, God's heart was the first heart to break.

God did not design roads in Atlanta that are confusing. God did not tell the driver to be in the wrong lane. But God's heart was the first heart to break when the bus plunged down onto the highway.

God did not make us racist. God did not make us sexist. God has never taught anyone to hate. We do that all by ourselves. And when we share hatred, God's heart is the first heart to break.

God did not tell the young man to purchase the guns. God did not tell the young man how to kill. God did not compel the young man to kill. He did it himself. And God's heart was the first to break as he watched an innocent slaughter.

God's goodness is present. God's goodness often shows up in little things. But mostly God's goodness shows up quietly, by being with us, loving us, and suffering with us through the most difficult of times.

In my office I have a sign which reads, *Bidden or not bidden, God is still present*. I actually have it in English and Latin. Often we see it and recognize it as recognizing that no matter what we say or what we do, God is with us. Sometimes we don't like this because, well, when we are doing something we ought not be doing and we aren't thrilled that God is present.

But, bidden or not bidden, God is present. This means that no matter what, good or bad, wonderful or dreadful, God is present. And where God is present, goodness is present, and where goodness is present, ultimately there is always hope, even in the midst of great despair.