

## **“BEING GOOD ISN’T GOOD ENOUGH”**

**Matthew 10:26-39**

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Last week in my dialogue sermon with Rev. Dr. Lindsay Curtis from Grace Baptist Church, he quoted Martin Luther King Jr, who said in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.” Granted, that was written in April of 1963, over 57 years ago during the Civil Rights Movement, but it could just as easily have been written today.

One challenge is, I don’t know anyone who considers themselves a bad person, do you? And yet, we’ve certainly seen some horrible acts of violence enacted by people not only in our current day, but in our history – no one can deny that – and some of them have even called themselves Christians. I would venture a guess that you, who are listening to this sermon would consider yourselves good people. And good people, and I would add, good WHITE people, are being called upon to stand up and speak out for racial justice and to acknowledge systemic racism and white privilege in a new way right now. Maybe for some of us, we’re hearing that call for the first time.

I’ve mentioned that the Presbytery of Southern New England is hosting an online book group studying Dolly Chugh’s book, ***The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias***. Dr. Chugh is a social psychologist at NYU’s Stern School of Business. The bio blurb on the back cover says she is an expert on the unconscious and unethical behavior of ordinary, good people. Perfect. She writes inside, “I see myself as a good person and yet my behavior is filled with evidence to the contrary. I cling to antiquated

gender stereotypes. I defend systems which favor well-off, well-connected families like mine. I misidentify people of the same race. I let homophobic jokes slide. I am judgmental of people whose gender identities confuse me..." and she concludes, "none of this makes me proud."

As she lays out her argument, Chugh discusses the term moral identity as "a measure of whether I care **about being** a good person, NOT whether I am a good person." p. 7 Interesting... I interpret that as the persona we project out to others versus the people we really are and the acts which come out of that persona.

She says, "... all of us, even the good people do bad things. It is easy for us to see this in other people and much harder for us to see it in ourselves. Through it all, we cling to an illusion of being a perfectly ethical and unbiased person and to the idea that such a 'good' person can exist."

As Christians, we know the passage from Romans Chapter 3, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." We know that we are all in need of God's grace... that God loves and forgives us and leads us to reconciliation... on a regular basis. So why all of the urge on the part of "good Christians" to project to others that we are somehow not in need of any change, or repentance, as to who we are or HOW we are? And why are we so defensive when people might suggest otherwise?

In his words to his disciples in Matthew 10, Jesus affirms that truth cannot be hidden nor silenced. "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops" (10:26-27). The work of the Gospel and our call as followers of Jesus is about truth-telling, as painful and as difficult as that can be. Jesus knows that bearing witness to truth can upset and provoke. It can disrupt the most intimate of relationships; it

can bring down powers and principalities. The truth is powerful, and the truth is demanding. As Jesus himself demonstrates, pursuing the truth can even mean taking up a cross.

Living that journey of truth-telling and uncovering what has been covered can be messy~~as we read forward... This is a tough passage, isn't it? Especially the part where Jesus says "I have come to set man against his father, and a daughter against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law and one's foes will be members of one's household. I mean, who wants to preach on that... ESPECIALLY on Father's Day?

It's hard to explain things which are visible to you and invisible to others, which is how systemic bias works.

I've been on edge. We've all been on edge in these days following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and now Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, as just the latest victims of the most public deaths. What we are seeing is that we, as a nation, have been called to examine the bias against people of color, and especially black people, not only as it relates to law enforcement and criminal justice... but in terms of what it means to be a person of color in this society. Many people of all backgrounds have finally had enough, and change is starting to take place as black people are standing up and saying, once again, ENOUGH, and white people, some white people, are listening and joining in the journey to becoming more awake – to experiencing the uncovering of what has been covered, as the scripture passage says.

The reality is, we all want to be seen as "good people" don't we? We live in a society where we want to get along with other people and just live our lives... and while that may be a wish for everyone, it's not a reality for many people of color, who are treated differently because of their skin color.

So we try and try again...

The other day I ventured out to the beach. I went to Sherwood Island State Park in Westport. I went early enough to secure a spot, ensuring the right amount of social distancing. All was still until about an hour later. A large family came and started walking near me. My anxiety increased. Don't they know there's plenty of space? Don't they know to social distance? Why are they getting so close? I haven't told you that this family was speaking another language. I tried to calm myself... and stay still... and enjoy myself.

The family got settled and there was plenty of room between us. They were lovely and I enjoyed watching them interact with the smaller children who were with them. There was a wide range of ages... an older grandpa, I assumed, was even there fully clothed and was helped by younger members who brought his wheelchair under their umbrella. All was well again.

Then, one of the state employees drove up in her ATV and got out. The family was curious, as was I. The high school girls sitting on the other side of me were interested too.

"Why were THESE people being singled out?" I wondered. The official-looking woman got out and greeted them. Nice enough, but I was ready to intervene if she gave them any trouble. She said, "I saw you bring the wheelchair, and wondered if you'd like a ramp so he can get into the water, if you'd like."

My heart sank... I had completely misjudged the situation and had been ready to pounce, to be the non-silent white person confronting injustice if need be. The official continued in her kindness, asking the family if this was their first time coming to the park and would they like a map? To which the man, the young father, said, "Sure. Thank you."

Sigh...

So, what do we do with all of this? Where is the hope?

Chugh says, "We redefine what it means to be a good person as someone who is trying to be better, as opposed to someone who is allowing themselves to believe in the illusion that they were a good person." The rest of the book outlines what that looks like and what it means to be what she calls a builder...

We live, as the scripture says, in the already and the not yet... as we wait for the coming of the full reign of God, and in the meantime, we know we're going to mess up, even when we have good intentions. We know we're going to hurt people, even when we're not trying to, but that doesn't mean we stop trying again. We humble ourselves and ask God for the ability to see more clearly, as we move along the road where all people may be honored as God's children.

Popular author, Brene Brown said recently in a conversation with a friend, "I'm not trying to BE right; I'm trying to get it right.

May it be so...Alleluia. Amen.