

“Eager to Do What is Good”
Psalm 66:8-20; Acts 17:22-31;
1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

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As I offer this sermon to you, this look at these passages and how they influence or speak to our faith, I would just note how difficult I continue to find this. I find worshiping together on a Sunday morning a wonderful time. It's a time to see people I care about deeply and who are part of a community, a fellowship of faith. So, I get a little tired of continuing to have to do this across the internet.

Indeed, I'm a little tired of this whole pandemic. I began to realize how seldom there is something in the news cycle that lasts this long. Usually something will be on for a little bit, and then it's over and we can move on. It's easy to forget about the issue that was brought up. I'm thinking about how there is a long-term nature to this pandemic. It dominates our news, and influences our lives, and shapes how we may be able to live our lives for the near future and maybe for many, many months. Really, there are many more issues in life that are much like that. There are things that we might be thinking about, but before this they didn't shape our lives in a way that forced us to pay attention. We had to do so by choice. There are lots of those kinds of issues in our world and in our lives.

In some ways, God is one of those. We could let God be a news item. We could think about how God came up in our lives every now and then. But it is in the midst of this frustration and uncertainty about how things are going to go, that I'm also reminded of God, and wondering where God is in all of this. It is easy for an issue, a thought, an approach we have to something to leave God out. I'm not sure I'm used to thinking about my life and saying I need to discern where God is in all this. I've done some of that on particular issues. Yet I sometimes wonder if, in general, I forget where God is. Are there times that I want to do good, that I might be eager to do good in my life, and then wonder where is God?

I think Paul was speaking to that issue of where is God in your life when he was talking to the Athenians. He saw evidence of them thinking about God. He suggested that they were trying to understand God, but hadn't quite figured out where God was in their lives. Partly, I think what he's saying is that you really need to turn around and accept God's coming to you, to open your hearts and your eyes, to open yourself to God's coming for he has come in Jesus. He is willing to enter into our lives, to help us see in a new way, to teach us and guide us, to be in a relationship with us, and to let us know the love of God given us, the grace of God shown to us, the hope of God that is before us.

As Paul comes to the Athenians, he's saying, “Look. Turn around. You need to see the one that is coming to you, the one that's resurrected, the one that will judge the world with righteousness, the one that cares about how we are eager to do good, or how we might make our decisions, or who we are and how we relate to one another.”

We try to figure out what it is we should be doing, who we are, how to move ahead. I am reminded, in the midst of this pandemic, that those kinds of questions are hard for me. I'm not quite as sure exactly what I should do. I know I can't fully see the future. Oftentimes, I think my own strength is not enough. I know I can't make that virus go away. I can't solve the problems of isolation all by myself. I continue to need the strength of God. In the midst of all this I ask how and why God is needed, and I find that answer: I need the strength God gives.

In fact, Jesus is talking about how he will be going away, how he won't be as present to them in the same way. "You won't see me like the world sees, but I will be with you and in you." One way that will happen is through the Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. Personally, I don't know completely how to go. I don't know fully the way. I have to continue to look to Jesus. I have to look to others, or to Jesus, or to some other way of knowing, because I can't know it all on my own.

This pandemic, in some ways, gives me some clarity. It invites me to think about how I struggle with what it means to do what is good and why I (and we) struggle with that. First Peter suggests that one reason we do is because it's not always appreciated. What's good for many may not be good for a few, and those few often complain. I think people who become privileged, become powerful, are able to live in luxury and they don't want to give those things up, even it's for the good of all. In some ways, our willingness to try to do this isolation, to try to shelter in place, to try to have physical distance, these changes in our lives are ways we try to be good for one another to keep the virus from spreading. We know the economic issues, the problems that come along with that, the struggle with having to change our lives, not feeling as free to do what we want, and for some, to really worry about where the money for their livelihood is going to come from. We even worry about whether our supply chains going to keep working. We have to think about all that. It's not always easy to figure out what is good and to do the good. Even if we are eager to do that good, we struggle because others don't see it the same way. There have been stories about people getting angry at others for asking them to wear a mask in situations where it's called for and where the policy is set. There's the story of a security guard getting shot because he wouldn't let people into the store without masks. The child had to have a mask on.

It can be dangerous at times to do good. I know I need that help that God gives. Jesus not only gives us direction, but tells we will have the Advocate. Sometimes that word is translated as "comforter". I saw one translate it as "comforting counselor." I think the word itself is closer to "advisor." The word is *paraclete*, and it has this sense of encouragement to it, one who encourages. I remember reading about it once and there was a description that it was the person who carried the flag and shouted out support as the troops went into battle. He was their paraclete, the one encouraging them forward. So as Jesus talks about giving us the paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, I think I need it both ways. First, I need that encouragement that only can come from God through God's Spirit, encouraging me to do what is good. I may be eager to do the good, but at times find it hard to do in the face of conflict. I need that help, that encouragement, that word, that feeling of being encouraged.

And second, he also describes it as the Spirit of Truth, of helping us see what is real and important and valued. In some ways, when Jesus says, "If you love me, you will do what I tell you to do," the idea of loving is to value and truly care for. It's more than just affection for Jesus or knowledge of who Jesus is. We can even believe Jesus is the son of God, but if we don't really value that and care about who he is and what he's taught and where he's taking us, then it hardly matters. But if we do love Jesus, we care and value what he has to say. If we make him central to our lives, then we will do what he tells us. Then, when we have what he's given us, we will use it.

He's given us the Spirit who encourages us and helps us see. We may use this encouragement and insight in every particular situation. We can plan all we want for every little detail of what might happen and still find in the moment that we missed something or it wasn't as we expected, and we need to have the support and encouragement of God's Spirit. In trusting the Spirit, there's a certain grace that enables us to work through whatever comes our way and gives us the courage to face what needs to be faced. We are called into the family of God, into the kingdom of God, into God's grace.

It is, indeed, as we sanctify our hearts, that is, allow our hearts to be fully committed to Jesus, to God's way and God's will and God's work, that we will be guided. We will know grace. We will have some grit to do what God has called us to do. We will not only be eager to do what is good, but find that we are capable of doing it. We will find that we are able to do it through the encouragement of God's Spirit, the guidance that Jesus gives us, the calling that is on our lives to be good and genuine, and the grit of faith. We will not only be eager to do what is good, but be able to do it. Amen.