

name for God. The king did the good that was his to do. His life bore fruit. He initially started giving his things away to gain the quilt. And he did receive that gift. But by the end of the story, he had almost forgotten what the quiltmaker had promised. Because his life of generosity and goodness was so fulfilling and meaningful, all on its own. That was the gift God gave him.

There's a short prose poem by Nikita Gill called "In 150 Characters or Less." It reminds us that turning toward good happens right in the middle of the worlds' enormous grief. Our small acts of goodness will not fix everything. But when we all turn together, when we all seek to do the good that is ours to do, there we find beauty, peace, holiness. There, our hearts may be prepared for the one whom God is sending. Gill's poem says,

*Everything is on fire, but everyone I love is doing beautiful things
and trying to make life worth living,
and I know I don't have to believe in everything,
but I believe in that.*

So what should we do? Let us believe in beautiful things. Let us believe in the power of doing good. Let us actually do the good that is ours to do, as we await the savior who is coming soon.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



December 8, 2024

Second Sunday of Advent

"The Good That is Yours to Do"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Luke 3:7-16 and Isaiah 58:9b-12

Rabbi Rami Shapiro has paraphrased a favorite verse from the prophet Micah in this way: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."¹ These words are an answer to the repeated question the people asked John the Baptist in our passage from Luke: "what should we *do*? What should we *do*? What *should* we *do*?"

The people had heard John call them out. They were not living the way they should. Their community had places of pain and people who were suffering. John's message was one of repentance. Though he didn't have any use for them to grovel or feel bad about themselves. By repentance, he urged them to *turn*. To turn away from the things that tear down life and to turn toward God. He wanted them to *bear fruit* in their lives. Which is a churchy way of saying, *do good*. Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly. Do the good that is yours to do. This was the way to prepare for the Messiah who was coming.

The people heard John. But they weren't sure how to respond. So often, we are like that, too. "We hear ya, God. We know things in the world are messed up. We know our own lives are messed up, too. But what should we do about it?" Each time they asked this question, John responded with tangible actions; with specific things they could do to turn away from the mess and turn toward God's grace. To point their lives toward the one God was sending to save.

To the crowds, John said, if you have two coats, give one away.

To the tax-collectors, who often cheated people to benefit themselves, he said, don't collect any more money than you're supposed to.

To the soldiers, he said, don't use your power to threaten others or enrich yourself.

1 Rabbi Rami Shapiro, *Wisdom of the Jewish Sages*, (Harmony/Bell Tower, 1995), 41. Paraphrase of Rabbi Rami Shapiro's interpretive translation of Rabbi Tarfan's work on the Pirke Avot 2:20; commentary on Micah 6:8.

2 Jeff Brumbeau and Gail de Marcken, *The Quiltmaker's Gift*, Scholastic Press, 2000.

John said: do the good that is yours to do. Turn away from the thing that twists your particular life into sorrow or ends up hurting others. Do the concrete thing right in front of you. You don't have to do everything, but you must do something. You can't bow out. And you can't keep going on the way you are. This was how people were meant to prepare the way for Jesus then. This is how we prepare the way for Jesus now. We will celebrate his birth, again, in a few weeks' time. But Advent is also a time to look ahead—to anticipate the time when Jesus will come again, to fulfill all his promises, to fully set the world right. Until that day comes, we wait expectantly, with hope. We do the good that is ours to do.

Each of us are individuals. And each of us are part of a wider network, a larger web of relationships. So the good I am called to do is different from the good you are called to do, depending on our gifts, skills and situation. Some of us can do the good work of advocating for change, knocking on doors, calling on leaders for better policies and equitable laws. Some of us are called to focus on the repair of relationships or the healing of wounds in our particular communities. Some of us are called to give out of our wealth and to model what generosity looks like. All of us have good that is ours to do.

It is good that John calls us to do. But this is not just “do-gooding.” These acts of goodness point us and others toward Jesus. As the prophet Isaiah says, acts like these help us to repair the breach in our society. They restore what has been broken. Restoration, repair, and healing is the business God has always been in. So we join God's good work when we do small actions toward those same ends. God gives us strength to do them. God promises to guide us continually. And we need all that strength and guidance. Because these acts are challenging. Giving away what we have; using our power wisely; standing up for what's right, even when that means we might get less—none of that is easy. It goes against everything we are taught. It is counter-intuitive. Yet when we find the courage and stamina to do good in the world, then results of these acts bring glory to God.

There is a modern folktale called *The Quiltmaker's Gift* written by Jeff Brumbeau. In it, the selfish king shows us a life that has gotten off the rails, which is hurting those who are poor. He fights tooth and nail not to repent, not to do any good. But then, with some help from the quiltmaker, we hear how the king finally begins to turn, and do some of the good that is his to do.

There was a quiltmaker living high up in the mountains, who sewed every day. People came to her with pockets full of gold hoping to purchase one of her exquisite quilts. But she declined to sell them one, saying, “I

give my quilts to those who are poor or homeless. The[se] quilts are not for the rich.”²

The mighty king in her land collected many beautiful things. Though he had everything money could buy, he was not happy. When he discovered the quiltmaker and her beautiful quilts, he demanded to have one, hoping it was the one thing that might make him happy. The quiltmaker would not give him one, of course, because he was not poor or needy. But she made the king a deal. “If you give away everything you own, then I will make a quilt for you. With each gift you give, I will sew in another piece. When all your things are gone, your quilt will be finished.”

The king was angered by her plan. First he tried to throw her to the bears, then he tried to send her into the sea. But still, he wanted that quilt. So finally, the king agreed to try and give something away. He looked around for just one thing he could bear to part with. He found a single marble. “But the boy who received it smiled so brightly in return, the king went back for more things.” He found a pile of velvet coats and he went around town giving them to people who were dressed in rags. He watched as the people began to parade with joy. Still, he didn't smile. But he kept at it. He gave away his carousel with live horses, his treasures and statues. As he saw people making merry with these gifts, he began to smile. He even laughed out loud.

As he gave away more and more, the quiltmaker kept her word. She began to sew. With each item the king gave away, she added another piece, another stitch to his quilt. Finally, one day a sparrow flew in the quiltmaker's window and landed on the end of her needle. And she knew that the king had done it; he had given everything away. So she placed the final stitch and went in search of the king.

When she found the king, his clothes no longer looked fine. But his eyes danced and he laughed out loud. When she wrapped the quilt around him, the king exclaimed, “I am not poor [so I don't deserve this quilt!] I may look poor, but in truth my heart is full to bursting, filled with memories of all the happiness I've given and received. I'm the richest man I know.” Still, she said the quilt was especially for him to enjoy. In the end, the quiltmaker kept on making quilts. Each time she finished one, she would bring it to the king. He would take it to the town, to find someone downhearted and in need, and he would bless them with the gift of a quilt.

The king turned from his selfish ways that were breaking down relationships, keeping him isolated, and harming his community. By giving away all that he had accumulated, he repented. He turned toward goodness; dare we say he turned toward *love*, which is, of course, another