

**“A Call Beyond Goodness”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**March 23, 2014**

In the last few weeks, due in part, I think, to our Interfaith Amigos program, and due in part, perhaps, to the Lenten discussion group on religious diversity in America, and perhaps due, in part, to the fact that fewer and fewer people are in organized church services on Sundays, many of us are questioning, and some of us are realizing, that being a good person doesn't seem to require our presence in church. We all know good people who don't go to church, and many of us know good people who are members of other faith traditions besides Christianity. Some of us even know good people who don't even believe in God, but all of these people are kind, they are generous, and many of them volunteer in our community. Good people are, in fact, all around us. Partly, this is because doing good is a universal value in our culture.

I was reminded of this just recently while I was at a stoplight. I was waiting for the light to turn green when a Salvation Army truck drove by in front of me, and it was, no doubt, one of those trucks that the Salvation Army uses to transfer furniture that is often given to them for their thrift shop. On the broad side of this truck was an advertisement which read “Donate Goods”, with the “Do” in “Donate” and the “Good” in “Goods” highlighted in red, so the message was clear as that truck drove by to “Do Good”.

Now, in many corners of our post-Christian world, doing good is equated with being an upstanding citizen, and in the arena of faith, doing good is being a faithful person. Now, of course, doing good, being a good person, and acting kindly towards one another are, as human beings go, important qualities for us to have, but it is important to recognize that none of these qualities require us to be in church. None of these qualities require an individual to be part of a Christian tradition, nor do any of these qualities require an individual to be a person of faith in God. The truth is that many people of different faiths and people of no faith at all are good people. So, the question for us today is: Why, then, do we need to be in church?

In Leviticus 18 and 19, we get our first glimpse into why it is important to be in church. In Leviticus 18, we have God speaking to Moses at a time when the Israelites have been freed from Egypt, but they have yet to come into the Promised Land. They are in an in-between time. In fact, in this scripture in Leviticus, they have not yet even received the Ten Commandments nor the 603 other laws that they will be given, and God makes it very clear to Moses what is at stake. God says “You will not do as they do in the land of Egypt which you have just come out of, and you will not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. You will follow my rules and, by doing so, you will live”.

When we come to church, we come to church because the way the world lives can kill us. That is to say, what Moses is getting at here, is that the world, whether it be in Egypt, in Canaan, or in our world today, wants us to live by a system of values and priorities that lead us away from God, and what God would have for us, and have for the entire human family, is lives of well being and Shalom, meaning peace. God wants for us to have lives of peace and well being, so in this passage, God is telling the Israelites, as God is telling us, “Be with me and you will find life”.

Then, in Leviticus 19, God speaks to Moses again, and God says “Go talk to the people and tell them this”. God says, “You are going to be my people, and this is going to be the sort of indicator that you are going to be my people. You are going to be a holy people”. God says “Because I am holy, you will be holy”. God says “Honor your mother and father, keep my Sabbaths, and do not turn to idols. I am the Lord your God”, so we come to church because we are charged with being God's holy people. We are charged with being God's holy people in the midst of an idolatrous world and, of course, that is what Moses was struggling with, and Israelites were struggling with, and God was

warning them that “the land from where you came, the land to which you are going is filled with idols but you are going to live differently. You are going to be holy people”.

Now, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, “holiness” is a 2-pronged word. It has two essences, two meanings of holiness, and the first is that holiness means that we would be separate from that which defiles. That is all biblical language for “that which makes us dirty”. So, God says to Moses, when you get to the Promised Land, you all need to be separate from that which is going to defile. So, individually, that means we are to live a life of moral purity, and that is difficult to do because moral impurity and all the seductions out there in the world is much more fun. As they say, if you are going to sin, sin boldly, but God is telling Moses, and God is telling us, you are going to be living in a land that is full of idols, and I want you to live holy in the midst of those idols, separate from, so it is an individual ethic, but then it goes on from there, the Book of Leviticus, the holiness codes of Leviticus (and if you have ever read Leviticus you probably didn't get too far in it because it is filled with these holiness codes which will bore the pants off of you), but part of those holiness codes are codes for Israel that are there to protect them and to keep them in a spirit of well being and their faith community preserved. Remember, Israel is going into a foreign land where there are many threats to their community, and these laws (many of them archaic) in Leviticus were put in place to protect them from those things that can threaten their faith community so, both as individuals and as a community of faith, God says we are to be holy.

Then, there is a second component of holiness. The second component of holiness, distinct from the command to be separate from, is this strange command to be deeply engaged with the social fabric of the community, so the temptation of being holy and separate from is to go off and live sort of a cave life or a monastic life, not engaging with culture, but holiness has this other piece which is a social morality, a social righteousness which is to say, keep away from that which defiles and, at the same time, be deeply engaged with the social well being of society. We hear this in Jeremiah. The prophets were always pushing this agenda that you need to live a life of righteousness, so in Jeremiah 7, the prophet is being called, and the word of God to Jeremiah is, do not hide out in the Temple. As Clodagh read that, you could hear in the Temple of the Lord “Here we are in the Temple of the Lord”. It was a bragging right of the Israelites to be engaged in the Temple of the Lord. For us, what that says is, don't come to church week after week after week, don't parade around town with your piety on display, don't do that while, the other six days a week, you live a life of injustice. So, it is really a teaching, in some ways, of the warning against hypocrisy. So, Jeremiah says if you amend your ways, if you don't oppress the immigrant, the orphan or the widow, if you don't treat badly those who have no social power, if you don't go after other gods, then I will stay with you. I will be your god and you will be my people.

So, we come to church, not really so that we can be good people, but so that we can be holy people who are always thinking about that which can drag us down, and thinking about that which needs our attention out in the world. So, to put some flesh on that point, the Brazilian priest, Dom Helder Kimaro once said “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint” which is his way of saying “When I give food to the poor, they call me good, but when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist”. He was saying, goodness and righteousness are two different things and we are called to righteousness.

So, when we get back to that question of why it is important that we come to church, there are many, many reasons why. One is, of course, to be together with our faith community that gives us hope and joy, and to feel the love and support of our faith community, but what our scripture is pointing to today is that we come to church, first of all, so that we align ourselves with the power of life, that we come here so that we can be reminded of what life is, what love is, what goodness is, what mercy is, and we are reminded of this story about God's intent for our lives, and we come so that we can be reminded of our call, that we are to be engaged in this world, cautious of what it offers, and yet, engaged to make it a better world.

Paul says in I Corinthians “Consider your call brothers and sisters. God chose what is foolish. God chose what is weak. God chose what is low and despised”. God chooses us to do something special, and sometimes what we forget is that God has chosen a special task for us, and we have forgotten sometimes that it is not just about our individual journey and getting right with God but that the church of Jesus Christ is called to be an invitational model community in the community so that people can look to the church and say “Look how those people live. Look at the love that they feel for one another. Look at the love that they feel for their community. Look at the love and care and compassion that they have for God’s creation because everyone else is kind of forgetting that, doing their own thing, pursuing their own agendas, yet there is this community of faith that is doing something different”.

What I sense is that Peace United Church of Christ is like other congregations, but Peace United Church of Christ also has a gift to share with the world that sometimes we have forgotten about, and we need to remember that gift, and that gift is God’s love, God’s love that we share with one another because when we look at each other, we see in each other Jesus. We see God in each other, and we are to share that love that we feel for one another with our world out there, and our world out there is dying for love.

So, the scripture today is about the call of the church in this day and time, the call of the church in the first century with Jesus. The call of the church in the future will be the call of spreading God’s love, of being a holy people so that people can look to us and meet us and engage with us in the community out there and say “Oh, My God! I want to be a part of that community because I need that love in my life and I need that forgiveness and that mercy and that grace in my life. I cannot live without that love”, and we are not only called to live that, and we not only can live that, but we know that love. Those of us who are here this morning know that God’s love has saved us because if we are honest (and I think that people who come Sunday after Sunday after Sunday are relatively honest people), when we look in the mirror, we can say “Oh, My God! Thank God that God has saved me because, without God in my life, I am really lost”. We are people of gratitude, gratitude and joy for what God has done with us which overflows in our spirit so much that we just can’t wait to share it with others. So, our faith is not really about being good, although that is clearly a part of what we do, but our faith is really way beyond being good people. Our faith is about being loving people, being people of mercy, being people of joy, being people of peace, so we are thankful today for God’s word which challenges us and reminds us what our call is—to be followers of Christ and to share that love everywhere we go. Thanks be to God. Amen.