

“Why Do You Call Me Good?”
Mark 10:17-31

“Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.’”

The definitions of the word “good,” according to Webster, are legion: effective, fertile, fresh, valid, healthy, sound, honorable, enjoyable, dependable, thorough, best, adequate, virtuous, pious, proper, able, loyal. With these seventeen definitions comprising only the half of it, Webster continues defining the good for another paragraph, completing the effort with the perfect segue into our story this morning. The good, Webster concludes, may be defined as “1. those who are good 2. what is morally good.” “1. Good Teacher, 2. what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “The young man’s enquiry about eternal life,” says Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose nephew magnificently conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra last night and whose life story will be sung by The Crossing at the Episcopal Cathedral this afternoon, the young man’s enquiry “is an enquiry about salvation [about life with God], the only ultimate, serious question in the world.”

“Good Teacher,” the man begins and Jesus declines the designation, pointing the man to the only true definition of good which is God. The gesture is not meant to be an act of self-deprecation. Rather as Jesus seeks nothing for himself, he literally reveals in himself the room God makes for us. Put another way, in him God was pleased to dwell that we might dwell in God eternally! We encounter God in him because everything he says and does and is points us to God who alone is good. Ironically, the man is kneeling before the answer to his question, the answer he will sorrowfully refuse.

“What must I do,” he goes on, “to inherit eternal life?” If eternal life is another name for God [Robert Jenson], the man is asking what he must do to be given God or how must he live in order to have God. Surely W.H. Auden had such a man in mind when he wrote in the prologue to *The Age of Anxiety*, “possessed by hope,/acquisitive, in quest of his own/Absconded self yet

scared to find it/...he bumbles by from birth to death...a fallen soul/With power to place, to explain every/What in [our] world but why [we are] neither God nor good.”

“You know the commandments,” Jesus says to him as all the rabbis said in response to such a question. He then proceeds to enumerate what is known as the second tablet of the law, somewhat rearranged, reduced and enlarged: you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, defraud (an interesting word choice), and you shall honor father and mother. We often think of God’s command as a list of those things that, by the doing or the not doing of them, we will be judged good or not good. Perhaps this was why the man had come to Jesus, seeking to know the good in order that he could do it and, in Paul Lehmann’s words, be “granted reserved seats in advance at the messianic banquet...empowered to occupy the chief seats in the kingdom of heaven.”

Perhaps. But Mark is daring deeper waters in this story. Here is a man who does not know where or to whom he belongs anymore. “It was common in Israel to speak of ‘inheriting’ what God had promised, because it was known that the future inheritance of God’s people depended upon God’s gracious promise alone [personal merit and moral achievement being inconsequential]. Only when in the course of history the unity of [God’s people]...was destroyed,” says Eduard Schweizer, [I think of the golden calf in the wilderness, the divided kingdom and the exile, the destruction of the Temple] only when God’s people were scattered “did the question arise: ‘Who then belongs to [the people] to whom God’s promise applies?’...It was not simply a well-adjusted, happy life which is at stake,” says Schweizer of the man in this story. “The question is concerned with ‘eternal life,’ final existence in the presence of God.” What does he need to do to belong to the people who belong to God?

Maybe with this in mind he says to Jesus as if Jesus has asked, “Teacher, I have kept all these [commandments] since my youth.” Again, he means this not as an expression of pride in

well-doing but as an indication of his covenantal obedience, of his continuing to live in relation to the God of promise and the people of promise. But Jesus has not asked. Jesus accepts the report of his obedience, knowing the man lacks what he really has come seeking, lacks the very thing the commandments presuppose: he is lacking a life with God. Having carefully kept the external demands of the commandments, he lives without God in the world.

Let me pause here in Mark's story about one young man to say the man, barely identified, is meant by Mark to be you and me kneeling before Jesus. Likewise and in quest of our own absconded selves, we also wonder what we must do to be with the God who has chosen to be with us. Raised on the thin ice of popular Christian piety, we take this really to mean, "How must I behave to go to heaven?" "Good teacher, what must I do to be good enough?" We think we have come to him to learn how to be good when he has come to us that we may know God who alone is good. Instead, like Adam and Eve before us, having chosen to know good and evil instead of God, we live East of Eden—not knowing where or to whom we belong anymore.

The irony, you see, is that, from the beginning, it is ourselves, already chosen and loved by God before we do anything; it is ourselves that God means to have at in the details of the commandments now made flesh in God's Son. Again says Lehmann, "The Commandments are descriptive statements of what happens behaviorally in a world that God has made for being human in." And now in Jesus Christ, it is as though God has given us a second chance at seeing life with God embodied--so that we may know in our hearts as well as our heads what it means to be human. God would have at our humanity for the sake of a great gladness when it is precisely *ourselves* [our hearts and minds and souls and strength] that we withhold and hold at a distance, offering God only the outward trappings of our obedience. "Binding us externally," says another theologian, the commandments "mean to bind [us] internally," mean to bind this man internally to the God who has chosen him in love.

How perfectly this external binding is illustrated in our day when people say, I believe in the values of the Judeo-Christian religion and want to pass them along to my child. But spare me the ongoing relationships: the messy humanity of the people of God and the demands of discipleship I neither want nor need and the God I cannot get my reasonable mind around. This is so for the secularly spiritual. And it is so for us Christians too. We may follow the rules, espouse and pass along Christian values to our children, but lack something crucial and we know it. We just do not know what it is.

Neither did the man kneeling at Jesus' feet. Given his outward obedience, no doubt he expected to hear that he had already done what needed doing to inherit life with God. Instead Mark simply tells us of God's undeserved goodness toward him: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him," says Mark. "He loves him. He reckons him as His [own]; He does not will to be without him; He wills to be there just for him," says Karl Barth. And because he loves him, because God loves us and wants at the whole of us, Jesus puts what following him would entail, what life with God would look like, in the form of an invitation and a direction: Sell what you have! Give to the poor! Follow me!

Suddenly we are like deer in the headlights. Revealed in Jesus' invitation is the fact that what we *have* has us! What the man in Mark *has* really "has him—in the very way in which God would have him, and alone should have him. He is ruled by the life proper to his great possessions," says Barth, "with their immanent urge to preservation, exploitation and augmentation. Their grip makes him inaccessible and useless as far as the command of God is concerned. It does this in a very simple way. It, too, instills into him fear and love and trust and hope. It too demands obedience, because it, too, is his lord."

So Jesus invites him to die to the man he is, that he might be the man who belongs wholly to God. "Sell all you own and give it to the poor," says Jesus. In other words, if you do not want

to be literal about it, live as though it does not have you. Just try! Free yourself from the need to preserve, exploit and augment your possessions so that you may live freely for the neighbor as God is for you—to be there for him, to be at her disposal as God stands at your disposal. You do not have to do this, of course; only if you want a life with God, says Jesus, you will find that something crucial about who you have chosen to be East of Eden has to go.

But Jesus is not finished. Follow me, he commands and finally we get the irony: that following Jesus is the answer to our question. “What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to be with God?” Jesus offers us himself and, given everything else we have given ourselves to, we cannot really take him up on the offer. We turn and sadly go our way. Note: the man with many possessions was not angry as we often are when someone suggests we rethink the way we live for Christ’s sake. He is sorrowful.

With the man still in his sight, Jesus now looks on the disciples, on those who *have* left everything behind to follow him, on those who are left in the company of God’s nearness. The disciples clearly have been shaken by this encounter. “Who then can be saved?” they ask. Peter anxiously reminds Jesus how much they have given up for him, speaking as one possessed still by what he has left behind.

Now we see that the only difference between these and the man who went away sorrowful, the difference between those in the church and those beyond her reach is simply this: these equally broken human beings, who only appear to have left behind everything to follow Jesus, may now be witnesses. By the unlikely reality of their being with Jesus still, though soon they will forsake him and flee, their lives proclaim that what is impossible with mortals is possible with God.

My friends, by grace alone, by the God who alone is good, we are here and together have been made witnesses to him who, looking on us, loves us. With his whole heart and mind and

soul and strength, he loves us and soon will show God's love for us in that, while we are still possessed by other things, he will lay down his life for us. Who can be saved? Just look at us. With God, all things are possible! Amen.