

Advent 2, Year A
December 8, 2013

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere
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Do you know a person that you think of as good? There is a little saying that church is full of good people trying to be better. I know we are all good people here. (Maybe there are one or two wolves in sheep's clothing, but we are all good people here).

And I am sure that you know many, many good people. I am thinking of that one person that comes to mind when you are asked "Do you know a person that you think of as good?" I immediately think of the Rector of the church where I worked previously, a woman with whom I worked for 11 years. After 11 years, the one thing that comes to mind when I think of her is that she was just a very good person.

One sound bite that was circulated immediately after Nelson Mandela's death was a quote from President Obama. "And we have lost one of the most influential, courageous, and profoundly good human beings that any of us will share time with on this Earth." Not many world leaders are remembered as good.

Nelson Mandela was not naive and he was not pure, he was strategic, but he was good.

And there are those who masquerade as good. When I was in high school I remember that one of my most used social critiques was to call someone a hypocrite. It was in college that I learned what this meant: hypo=under, crites=mask. Someone who is wearing a mask of goodness. Someone who is not what they seem.

In today's gospel John the Baptist calls the Pharisees and Sadducees who come to him "you brood of vipers." I think he sees their hypocrisy. He saw their souls. The Pharisees knew every jot and tittle of the law and were strictly observant, the Sadducees knew every jot and tittle of the ritual and ceremony and did it perfectly. But John the Baptist was calling for people who could let go of all they clung to as their justification. John was calling for repentance.

We are good people but there is always another level of that which we must let go of. As we are drawn closer and closer to the light, we can see more and more that needs healing and cleansing.

As we draw closer and closer to the light of the baby in the creche, we are invited to be honest about what hinders us, about what is unhealthy in our attitude or behavior, and to make a decision to let go of it.

There is also a larger dimension to Jesus' teaching: He is not just leading us into greater goodness, but also into right relations.

We have this image in both Isaiah and the Psalm today: The life-giving spirit or breath that comes from God to us brings peace, justice and a world at peace.

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid
the calf and the lion and the fatling together
and a little child shall lead them.*

This is a vision of a world in right relationship; a world at peace and in harmony. Our Christian path is not only about good habits and good intent, but about right relationships. Jesus' teaching is about love and peace AND our relationship to a just world.

There was an article on NPR this week about a recent study from 2 marketing professors at UC Riverside who analyzed the behavior of 49 Fortune 500 companies like IBM and Nike and Pepsi who scored high on an index of corporate social responsibility; Everything from philanthropy to environmental stewardship, to how well they treat their employees.

They found that engaging in corporate social responsibility at one point in time actually leads to an increase in corporate social irresponsibility at a later point in time. For those firms who scored highest on corporate social responsibility they were able to predict corporate social irresponsibility later in time.

Two stark examples are Enron the energy company in Houston, and Bernie Madoff the investment manager in New York. Both were renowned stars of philanthropy later revealed as fraudulent and deceptive, causing harm to thousands of people.

This study applied a psychological theory called "Moral licensing" to corporations. Moral licensing= Sometimes when we do good things, we bank them, and then we cash them in. The theory says that people are actually more likely to engage in morally questionable behavior after they have engaged in moral behavior. So moral behavior can almost function like a type of monetary currency and we bank this. Calories are an analogy: We eat healthy all year and then we pig out at the holidays.

The theory says that we all carry around the sort of mental account of our moral worth. So when we do bad things we feel the need to compensate by doing good things, like a cheating husband who buys his wife a diamond bracelet and when we do good we can feel entitled to be bad.

When John the Baptist snarls "You brood of vipers" to those Pharisees and Sadducces I think he refers to this. They feel they have done good by keeping the law, living righteously, and maintaining the proper round of ceremonies and observances in the Temple,

What they have neglected is justice. They feel right before God because of their goodness but they have neglected justice in the society. They have forgotten what the bible calls "widows and orphans:" Those without a voice, without support, who face a downward economic spiral. They have forgotten those members of society who are trying to raise a family on a full time minimum wage job at \$19.000 a year

They have forgotten the voiceless and powerless earth systems seriously deteriorated by the burning of fossil fuels and environmental degradation. They have forgotten the damage done by the rise in CO2 in the atmosphere which threatens not the planet but the viability of the human race.

We are good people here, and we are not those Pharisees and Sadduces who pay lip service, and fail to show fruit in their lives.

+We are good people who are people of justice-- remembering the poor, and our Mother Earth who sustains us and gives us life.

+We are good people who try very hard to remember to be people of consistent and strong integrity which doesn't do hidden harm behind a facade of goodness.

+We are good people who remember that goodness is its own reward in a life of peace, health, and fulfillment.

The actor Morgan Freeman, who played Nelson Mandela in the film Invictus said this last week: "Today the world lost one of the true giants of the past century. Nelson Mandela was a man of incomparable honor, unconquerable strength, and unyielding resolve."

Let us be inspired by Nelson Mandela and re-commit ourselves, in our humble way, to follow the good news of Jesus Christ. "To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God."
(*Micah*)