

“And God Called It Very Good” Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8; Mark 1: 9-15

In our first couple weeks of our exploration of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, we discussed how all of the work of the Holy Spirit begins out of love. “*For God so loved the world...*” is not only a statement about Jesus Christ, it is also a statement about the creation of the world. The Holy Spirit, God and Christ begin and end in love and it is the expression of love in creation, Christ and Scripture which gives us life and invigorates the spirit.

In Genesis, the Holy Spirit is right there at the beginning. “*The Spirit of God hovered over the waters*”, the story of creation tells us. It would be easy in a sermon on the fruit of goodness to talk about *doing good things*, but I think the fruit of the Holy Spirit calls us to something deeper than just doing things. I believe the Holy Spirit is calling us to remember in a fundamental way where we came from and what we are called to be in this world. In the fruit of goodness, then, she calls us to see the essential goodness of God's great creation. The Holy Spirit calls us to understand spiritually and materially that God is the source of all goodness.

After the order is separated from the chaos, the light from the dark, the waters and the sky, the land from the waters, the plants grow into the earth, the day from night, the water creatures and the earth creatures come into being and humankind itself is created, “*God looked at everything he had made, and he found it to be very good*” (Gen 1:31). This is as true now as it was then. We are, in our created, essential being, very good in the estimation of God. Paul tells Timothy, “*Everything God created is good; nothing is to be rejected when it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by God's word and by prayer*” (1 Timothy 4:4).

When we consider the fruit of goodness, then, we are considering more where we have come from and who we are in relation to where we have come from than the things we do. Think about it for a moment, if by the power of the Holy Spirit (we'll get to how in just a moment) I am given the fruit of goodness, then how can I not begin to see the glimmer of how God intended things to be in the very beginning in all things? *Everything God created is good*. If that is true, and Scripture clearly begins with that very affirmation, then what is not included in the claim?

I don't want to take a lot of time with the idea of evil in today's sermon, since I am interested in what the fruit of goodness means for us as a gift of the Holy Spirit, but this is a good place to give you a very traditional definition of the nature of evil (St. Augustine is the first theologian to speak of evil this way). If everything God has created is good, then evil is simply anything which seeks to detract from the goodness of God's creation. When we speak of evil in this way, it has no real life outside of God's universal view. It can only be known by how far away it is from the goodness we know in Jesus Christ and God.

Thus, the disobedience of Adam and Eve, which got them kicked out of the garden, is marked not by the inherent evil in either the snake or the human or Satan, but only by how far it deviates from the essential goodness in all things, including humankind. Or to put it another way: the willful desire we have to stake our own claim on God's created goodness and act contrary to God's will allows us to *fall away* from God's goodness. The further we fall, the less clarity we have on what is good. If we get far enough away, it can begin to look like really bad things may actually be good things. We can do this deliberately or unconsciously, but the result is the same – a break in our relationship with God and thus with all of creation. That is what the 'curse' or 'consequence' in Genesis 3 is all about – the loss of our knowing of our essential goodness as created beings in God's great creation.

I tell you all this because the fruit of goodness, the essential goodness of God's creation begs a question: where do we stand in relation to the goodness of God? Where do we stand in relation to creation itself? The first 9 or so chapters of Genesis are an attempt to answer that question, but it is not really an answer that is fulfilling, because people keep asking it. Our Psalm asks, "*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*" (Psalm 8:3-4). Job asks this question as well. We can really only know the fruit of goodness in relation to God's absolute goodness and so we know that the good is wholly a thing of God. "*The earth is the Lord's and everything in it*", 1st Corinthians tells us.

When Psalm 8 was written, and when Genesis was written, we didn't know what we know today. The stars and planets and the sun were part of a dome which surrounded the earth. All there was in the universe was this floating globe with concentric bubbles which surrounded it, each bubble a different level of material and spiritual reality. The earth and the universe were much smaller back then, but even then, stepping outside and becoming aware of all of creation surrounding us was a humbling and overwhelming experience. We were then and even more so now very small in relation to God's vast and swirling creation.

And yet, "*Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour*" (Psalm 8:5). Where then do we stand in relation to God's great creation? Just a little lower than God himself, with the angels and the heavenly messengers. The Psalmist wants us to remember where we have come from, that we are in the very image of God – we, you and I, are the *Imago Dei*. It is an incredible claim, and it is a central Christian claim. St. Augustine, in his *Handbook of Faith, Hope and Love*, says:

For the Christian, it is enough to believe that the cause of all created things, whether in heaven or on earth, whether visible or invisible, is nothing other than the goodness of the Creator, who is the one and the true God.²¹ Further, the Christian believes that nothing exists save God himself and what comes from him; and he believes that God is triune, i.e., the Father, and the Son begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeding from the same Father, but one and the same Spirit of the Father and the Son.

By this Trinity, supremely and equally and immutably good, were all things created. But they were not created supremely, equally, nor immutably good. Still, each single created thing is good, and taken as a whole they are very good, because together they constitute a universe of admirable beauty (Handbook

The fruit of goodness is intimately tied into creation itself, by God's very nature and it is this very thing that we somehow forget when we fall away from God. The relationship between God, creation and goodness itself breaks down and becomes tainted, stained, broken. This is what sin is and this is what the Holy Spirit seeks to erase in the act of baptism. In fact, without God and without this restored relationship to God, we cannot truly know the fruit of goodness. We must return to where everything started if we are to live into the fruit of goodness and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This is what baptism does. Baptism returns us to the very beginning. Remember Genesis 1:2? "*And the Spirit of God hovered over the waters*", it says. In Mark 1, the Holy Spirit returns like a dove and blesses Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Just as the Holy Spirit heralds the good creation of all things, so also our baptism heralds the new creation of our very being. We are restored to relationship with the Source of all good and dignity, the Creator of all things. The Holy Spirit restores the breach between us and God created by our falling away from God. Whether you were baptized as an infant, or made a voluntary decision to be baptized, it is the remembrance of that act which allows you to

remember where you came from – God's good creation, and where you stand in relation to God's infinite goodness – just a little lower than the angels.

If I am allowed to in such a Protestant setting, I want to quote Pope John Paul II, who says in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*,

“A person who believes in the essential goodness of all creation is capable of discovering all the secrets of creation, in order to perfect continually the work assigned to him by God. It must be clear for those who accept Revelation, and in particular the Gospel, that it is better to exist than not to exist. And because of this, in the realm of the Gospel, there is no space for any nirvana, apathy, or resignation. Instead, there is a great challenge to perfect creation—be it oneself, be it the world....” In other words, now that you know where you are from and where you stand with God, it is your responsibility to help the rest of the world see that essential goodness – in what you do, in what you say and who you are.

We, all of humankind, are carriers of the image of God. *“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”* (Genesis 1:27). We are a reflection of the goodness of God and by our baptism we know this to be true.

This claim is where Christianity gets into a lot of trouble, though. This claim provides all kinds of ammunition for the atheists and those in opposition to the faith (remember from last week: we must treat them with gentleness). Where is the goodness of God and how are we the bearers of the image of God when there are weekly mass shootings, massacres of innocents in Syria, groups of people denigrated and excluded because they were born a particular way or unable to attain a particular way of life, when levees and dams fail and thousands die in disasters, when people are just plain mean to one another or worse, simply don't care?

Those are actually good questions. Those asking those questions are actually responding to what they see around them. But we are, as we said a couple weeks ago, in the in-between time. We get glimmers of the goodness of God and as the baptized, covenanted people of the Way of Jesus Christ, we are actually the stewards of God's goodness in this world. We look to Jesus as the example, image and promise of God's absolute goodness.

The author of Hebrews wonders the same thing. She reminds us in answer to *“What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?”* that *“You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honour...”* and then she says *“Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, 9but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone”* (Hebrews 2:6-10) The author says the answer to our questions and the solution to the intractable problem of *“How long, O Lord...”* or *“When, O my God...”* is always Jesus Christ.

Paul says to Titus in his short letter, *“when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, 5he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, 7so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone”* (Titus 3:4-8).

Because Christ was baptized we are like Christ in our own baptism and the Holy Spirit, who also came upon us like a dove in the waters of our baptism, seeks to restore us to a relationship of goodness,

a reflection of God's perfect and absolute goodness. The very possibility of such a thing makes us just a little bit lower than the angels.

The Holy Spirit is bursting at the seams of our souls to reflect the goodness of God to the whole world. Creation itself testifies to this goodness. The fruit of the Holy Spirit, then, allows us and calls us to see and seek out that goodness throughout the world and in our lives. We get glimmers and whispers and flashes of what that goodness is like.

At the end of my second summer in Montana, I had the pleasure of doing a wedding and a baptism in the same ceremony. The couple got married and wanted their baby baptized after they were married. The day was beautiful. It was an outdoor wedding. The backdrop for the couple was Pilot Peak and the sun was just setting behind it as the wedding began. The leaves were just changing so flashes of yellow and orange shown in the trees at the bottom of the mountain. The beauty of God's creation was very present. People from around the country had come together for this wedding, so there were almost 60 people there. God's good creation was on full display. In the midst of it, God's word was preached, two people professed their love for one another and the gathered people were witness to all of it.

Then, after we were done, I said, *"Let's do a baptism!"* and we all walked down to the Clark's Fork River, which flowed past the cabin where the wedding had been held. I waded into the river since the newly married couple didn't want to get their dress clothes wet. The water was exceptionally clear and really, really cold. I said some words about baptism and then took the baby and splashed water on his head, saying, *"I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You are cleansed in the waters of baptism and are welcomed into the family of God and Jesus Christ. May the Holy Spirit bless you always"*, and then I was done because I was really cold.

But there, surrounded by God's goodness in creation and in loving relationships, I saw a glimmer of what God means for it to be like for us. The fruit of goodness and the Spirit of Creation open windows in our souls and our minds so we can remember again who we are in relationship to God and Christ and who we are meant to be in this world. In our baptism, we are restored to who we are and who we were meant to be. We are formed in the image of God. We are therefore carriers of the image of God in our very creation – body, mind, soul and strength. And we are stewards of that goodness in creation, in others and in ourselves. May the Holy Spirit make is so for each one of us and may she be the gateway to all the things of God through whom and by whom we know all goodness. Amen.