



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -  
November 19, 2017 Sermon

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## Thank God—It Could Be Worse!

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 100; Colossians 3:15-17

Dayton—the whole Miami Valley—has a great network of bike trails: dedicated bike trails: no automobiles, beautiful scenery; you get on them and you can go, go, go.

It was an unseasonably warm spring day, early last April, the wind was blowing from the south, the forecast said it would rain in the afternoon, but that morning, Saturday morning, the sun was out; the air was warm; I could feel spring coming; so I got on my bike, and went, went, went—due north on trail #25.

It was great; I felt great; I was great. I hit my top speed, held it there, and kept it there—no problem. I guess I hadn't slacked off this winter as much as I thought . . . It was all me now. I could see their heads turning: "Look at that guy . . . that *young* guy, over there . . . flying by on his bike!"

And I kept going. I had planned to go out for ten miles ("first ride of the year, sermon to finish, just take it easy"). But I felt so good, I just kept going: past Vandalia, go, go, go, past Troy, go, go, go, all the way past Tipp City, twenty-five miles out now, a little tired, I better turn around.

And I did—right into a 30-mile-per-hour headwind. Somehow, the whole way out, I hadn't really noticed the wind. But I really noticed it on the way back—every wobbly pedal stroke, every scrape of my bike-cleats-on-the-macadam-when-I-had-to-get-off-and-walk-my-bike, every one of those 25 miles back—I really noticed the wind: it was all wind now. I could see their heads turning: "Look at that guy . . . that *old* guy over there, falling off of his bike."

It was all wind . . . until the forecast proved right . . . and it started to rain.

You don't notice the wind at your back, only the wind in your face; you never know how good you had it, until it's gone. Or as Arthur Schopenhauer, the 19th-century German philosopher, put it, "It is a curious fact that in bad days we can very vividly recall the good time that is now no more; but that in good days, we have only a very cold and imperfect memory of the bad."

Schopenhauer was a pessimist. That's not just me talking—he said it about himself: That quotation is from a book of his, called "Studies in Pessimism." I could have just as easily gone to his book, "On the Vanity of Existence" or "On the Suffering of the World," but no need: you can hear his pessimism in that one quotation, which really comes down to this: **Whatever good we have in this world . . . will only make us more miserable in our misery.**

As Schopenhauer sees it, when any good is present for us, we're mostly oblivious to it—the wind at my back on the ride out to Tipp City, for example. But when it's gone—when I have to walk my bike back to Dayton into the wind and the rain—then, *and only then*, do I become fully aware of just how good I had it; and that only compounds my misery. So: **Whatever good we have in this world . . . will only make us more miserable in our misery.** That's the philosophy of pessimism.

So . . . Happy Thanksgiving to you and to yours. But since Thanksgiving is coming, and since I don't want to make you even more miserable in your misery, and since I want to preach the Gospel, let me amend Schopenhauer, starting with this: *Thank God—It Could Be Worse.*

*Thank God—It Could Be Worse.* The first words that Adam and Eve say to one another on leaving—on being expelled from—the Garden of Eden.

Think about what God had said to them earlier, “Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die.” But when they do eat from it, on *that* day, *do* they die? No, and not for a whole lot more days, either, something like 930 more years in fact (that's how long the Bible says Adam lived), which, you have to admit, is a pretty generous, a pretty gracious, stay of execution. But you don't have to look that far into the future to see my point. Clothes—look at their clothes. Immediately after eating of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve realize that they're naked, and try to cover themselves up with fig leaves. Now, fig leaves (everybody knows) make for bad clothes: don't move with you, don't wash well, and worst of all, they're itchy. So what does God do? Makes them new clothes, much better clothes. It's right there in Genesis 3:21: “And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.”

And so, as Adam and Eve leave Eden, they're alive, and they have the clothes on their back—new, God-made clothes. Looking over their shoulders one last time, seeing the angel shut the gates of Eden with the flaming sword, they look at each other and say, “Thank God, it could be worse.” And so they begin to make the best of it.

“Thank God, it could be worse.” It's not an expression of mildly mitigated pessimism (though it might seem so at first), but an expression of hope (hope that God is for us and not against us)—they are the first words that Adam and Eve say to one another on leaving the Garden of Eden, although for some reason they've disappeared from all extant Biblical manuscripts. . . . Anyway, even if they didn't make it into our Bible, those were the first words they said, and the first words of their post-Fall friendship, their post-Fall piety, and their post-Fall godliness. And they are, in truth, the first words of all post-Fall friendship, piety and godliness, including our own.

Now I can guess what you're thinking. You're thinking “OK, Richard, I see what you're saying: I'll try to see the glass as glass half-full—but really, is that all the Gospel comes down to?”

No, I promise you, no. And I'm *not* telling you to see the glass as half full, or half empty, for that matter. None of us knows for sure how full or empty the glass really is. We never do. Schopenhauer was right at least to this extent: we are mostly oblivious to the goodness around us, nor can we really imagine how bad things might get. We can't really take the measure of either good or bad—at best it's only an educated guess. Think of me, on my bike to Troy. Or think of us, as a nation, only two years ago: who could've foreseen our present political landscape?

What I am telling you is this: Friendship, piety, godliness—they are not primarily about how we look at things, but about what we do, and even more than that, about what we do in response to what God has done, is doing, and will do for us in Jesus.

Think about that guy in Jesus' Good Samaritan story: that guy lying there in the ditch, robbed, beaten up, left for dead.

It's the priest—the one who passes him by on the other side of the road, who thinks to himself "That's really not so bad." He's the one who shouts over to him: "All things work out for the good for the good for those who love God," and then goes right on walking—he's the glass-half-full guy.

And it's the Levite—the one who also passes him by on the other side of the road, who thinks to himself, "That's really bad." He's the one who shouts over to him: "May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble! May the name of God protect you!" and then goes right on walking—he's the glass-half-empty guy.

But it's the Samaritan—oh, let's update this story a little, shall we?—she's the undocumented immigrant driving a 1980's vintage, chocolate-brown Buick Le Sabre with the back bumper held on by bungee cords and the wrong bumper stickers on that back bumper, *she's* the one who walks over to him to see how bad it really is. And kneeling over him, says, "Thank God, it could be worse—you're alive." She's the one who puts him in her back seat, drives him to the emergency room, where she puts down her credit card and her home address, and waits to talk to the police, thereby risking her own deportation—she's the good one, the one who shows us what true friendship (that is, love of neighbor), true piety (that is, love of God), and true godliness (that is, becoming like God) look like.

Yes, not just friendship (love of neighbor), but also piety and godliness (love of God and becoming like God). And to understand that, you have to understand this first: we're that guy, before we're anything else, we're that guy, that guy lying there in the ditch, robbed, beaten up, left for dead. That's us, all of us, all humanity. And Jesus is the Good Samaritan, the undocumented immigrant, the one we don't welcome but greet only with contempt, wishing he'd just go back to wherever he came from. It's only when we begin to realize all that he is for us and all that he does for us—and realize that all the way down—it's only then, that in response to all that he is and does, we can begin to love him and become like him, to love him and become like him like that Jesus-woman in the Le Sabre did.

It's not a matter of seeing (half-full or half-empty); it's a matter of doing—what we do in response to what God has done, is doing, and promises to do for us in Jesus.

*Thank God—It Could Be Worse.* I commend these words to you not only for Thanksgiving, but for holiday shopping, for Christmas, for the new year, really, for all life—even for our current political situation. If the turkey blows up in the oven—well, thank God—it could be worse: we still have the mashed potatoes, green beans, and stuffing. If the whole dinner is ruined, well, thank God it could be worse: the neighbors have invited us over. And if we don't know our neighbors, well, let's order pizza and invite them over.

*Thank God—It Could Be Worse—TGICBW.* In fact, I commend these words to you not just for the days ahead, but for today as well. If we don't have heat in the church this morning . . . well, Thank God, it could be worse, at least we have electricity. And besides it gives us the opportunity to move closer to our neighbors, and thus put the lie to that old slander that we Presbyterians are the "frozen chosen."

We're not—just move a little closer, you'll see.

*Thank God, it could be worse.* That means that we look for the good in any situation—the good that God has blessed us with beyond our deserving—and then we appreciate that goodness by acting on it, by seeing where and how we can share it with others, as Jesus shared all of God's goodness with us.

"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"—that's the question the lawyer asks Jesus. And in response, Jesus tells the Good Samaritan story. In other words, to answer the lawyer's question about eternal life, Jesus, the one who gives eternal life, our Good Samaritan, tells a story—about himself. And then he says: "Go and do likewise," which means "Go and be like me, and then you will have my life, and have it eternally.

Which means that the good that we have in this world—the true friendship, the true piety and the true godliness—is only a foretaste of still greater good to come. And so, as Paul says, we put on our new, God-made clothes: we are renewed in the spirit of our minds, and clothe ourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Which means we need to amend Schopenhauer slightly: It's not Whatever good we have in this world . . . will only make us more miserable in our misery . . . Instead, it's this: **Whatever good we have in this world . . . will only make us more joyful in our joy.** That's the Gospel, the real good news.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.  
Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.  
Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.  
Give thanks to him, bless his name.  
For the Lord is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

So Happy Thanksgiving to you and to yours—and thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.