



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
November 5, 2017 Sermon

A Christ to My Neighbor

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah: 62:10-12; Matthew 5:43-45,48; Philippians 2:5-8

He came up to me right after class last Sunday to ask a question:

“Richard, there’s something I don’t get: If Luther was right,” (last Sunday was Reformation Sunday: I was preaching on, and teaching on, Martin Luther and his posting of the 95 Theses that started the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago) “if Luther was right, if it’s all grace, if it’s all already been done for us by Jesus and our good works don’t matter for our salvation at all, then why bother—why would anyone bother—to do good works at all?”

That’s a great question,” I said, “in fact, Luther, Calvin and all the Protestant Reformers got asked that all the time.”

He didn’t have to say it; I could read it on his face . . . “Well, so . . . what’s the answer?”

“Well, you know, it’s interesting; historically that didn’t happen—just the opposite.”

And I was right about that: the Protestant Reformation had innumerable, profound, and lasting effects—the church was divided, kings were deposed, and new forms of government were established; hospitals, schools and colleges by the thousands were founded; a mountain of books were printed, a torrent of words, unleashed; some have argued that modern global capitalism is a direct outgrowth of the Reformation—the Protestant Reformation had lots of effects, good and bad, but inactivity and moral complacency cannot be numbered among them.

But still it was written all over his face: “Well, so . . . what’s the answer?”

“Well, the short answer is gratitude. We do good works not to win our salvation from God but out of our gratitude to God for his giving it to us.”

It was right there on his face: “OK, I *guess*, if you say so . . . But are you going to explain that?”

“Well, this goes pretty deep into moral psychology.”

Same look.

“You know, we should talk about this next Sunday.”

So here it is next Sunday; and here I am; so here goes my dive into moral psychology:

Whether it's "One good turn deserves another," meaning that if someone does you a favor, you should look to return it, or whether it's "Pay it forward," meaning you should "repay" it to others instead of back to your original benefactor—the idea can be found in all human cultures as far back as you can go—*gratitude is a virtue, and if it is real, it must result in action.*

For centuries gratitude was not only a virtue, but *the* hallmark of all virtue: a good person could not be truly good without gratitude and ingratitude indicated a particularly hardened heart.

In fact, it's interesting to consider why gratitude has a lesser place in our moral economy today (we tend to think of ingratitude as a mere lapse in manners—forgetting to say thank you—rather than as a grave moral deficiency). Perhaps it's because, back when gratitude was so important, people sometimes made a show of it, paraded a counterfeit version of it, so that it became not a spur to action but an expression of self-satisfied complacency.

"Thank you, Jesus thank you, Jesus – for making me just the way I am!" So says Ruby Turpin to the world at large and to everyone sitting in the doctor's waiting room in Flannery O'Connor's short story, *Revelation*. And for that, she deserves just what she gets – a large, heavy Introduction to Psychology textbook hitting her square in the forehead. And if you know the story, it's called "Revelation" for a reason: getting hit in the head with that textbook does spur Ruby to action. We *are* saved by grace alone, but sometimes, God's grace first strips us of our pretensions and self-delusions—that's part of it. Jesus never said being born again was easy.

So gratitude without action, like faith without works, is dead—hollow, a mere verbal pretense. Gratitude, if it be real, must result in action

"If someone has given you a leg up," (this is the way I heard it growing up)—in other words, if someone has done you a good deed, helped you out in a difficult situation, helped you overcome an obstacle, "then you should do the same for someone else" whenever the opportunity presents itself. Pay it forward.

And the general principle here also finds its articulation in all human cultures as far back as you can go: good generally produces good; bad, bad. Our everyday experience confirms this, too: someone who has known mostly love, support, and goodness will tend to be loving, supportive, and good in his or her relationships and actions; whereas someone who has known mostly neglect, abuse, and badness will tend to be . . . Well, we all know the stories, they are part of the everyday sadness of life, for us and for every generation.

But the heroes—the ones overflowing with grace, are the ones who break the cycle of abuse, the ones who say, "Yes, I have suffered, but that doesn't define who I am, or my relationships or my actions. I want to act so that others don't suffer the way I did."

"But nobody did that for you," we might say to the heroes.

We might say that, but we already know what their response would be: "Yes, and that's precisely why I must do it for others." Their saying that—their doing that—that's what makes them heroes. Sometimes the capital with which some people pay it forward is drawn directly from the Bank of All Goodness without any prior human intermediaries. That's what makes them heroes.

And of course when it comes to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we can't pay it back. The debt is too great—infinite, in fact—we can only pay it forward. But here we do good for others not *instead* of paying it back to our original benefactor, but as a *way* of expressing our gratitude to our original benefactor. The way to thank God is by doing good to others. That's what Luther says in the quotation I put on the front of your bulletins:

When God in sheer mercy and without any merit of my part has given me such unspeakable riches, shall I not then [listen now for the four adverbs] shall I not then freely, joyously, wholeheartedly, and unprompted do everything I can to give myself as a sort of Christ to my neighbor as Christ gave himself for me?

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus: to give myself as a sort of Christ to my neighbor as Christ gave himself for me—that's our work. And here's the first thing about that work: when we do it, God is so generous that God gives us even more grace in the process. It would be enough, more than enough, for us pay it forward as a way of expressing gratitude, but God, being God (go figure) pours out even more grace on us in the process—(1) freedom, (2) joy, (3) a whole heart, and (4) a natural spontaneous love for what is good—the unspeakable riches from the Bank of All Goodness.

The end of all this is holiness. God is holy—it is the quality that defines God and belongs pre-eminently to God. But because God is so generous, God's holiness is contagious. (James Kugel says just this in the other quotation I put on the front of your bulletin). We catch God's holiness by paying the love of God forward, by giving ourselves as a sort of Christ to our neighbor, as Christ has given himself to us. That's how we pay it forward. That's how we share in the life and the light of God, that's how we become the life and the light of God in the world. That's how we become holy. *Be perfect as your father in heaven in is perfect.*

And here's the second thing about our work: it's *our* work; not my work, not your work, but our work—the work of the church. And I for one need that, because I know can't do it by myself. This came clear to me once more just this past week:

It was Wednesday, All Saints Day, and we (the staff) were meeting in the West Parlor. We were planning this worship service, actually we were planning only that part of it that's about to happen, where we come forward with our pledges and offerings. I was at the white board, developing a diagram of the set-up and traffic flow, using all the dry-erase markers to show where the choir would come down (red), which ushers would lead you forward (green), which would would lead you back (blue), which ushers would bring the balcony down (purple), where the tables and baskets would be set up (brown and black), and who would press the super-secret button to send the super-secret signal to John that now that everybody has come forward with their pledges, it's time for him to play the doxology (dotted red lines). Now, I don't mean to disparage this work, because I hope that coming forward in a few minutes will be a holy moment for you, in which, as you pay it forward, you experience something of the life and the light of God. And that's much less likely to happen if we have confusion, chaos, and gridlock up here. And besides, we are Presbyterians—decently and in order and all that. But we were well into second hour of the meeting, and then we had to take a break so Amanda could get a new set of markers out of the supply closet in the office . . . and well, I needed a cup of coffee. So I went downstairs.

Now you may know that on Wednesdays, downstairs, we do our ID Ministry—where we help anyone who walks in get the information, the addresses, and the money to get an ID (often a birth certificate), so

they can begin to put their lives together—rent an apartment, apply for a job, enroll children in school, get a drivers' license, etc. On Wednesday, we served 67 clients, 18 children, and wrote 100 checks for a total of over \$1600—all in the space of three hours—a pretty typical Wednesday.

And you may also know that part of my job as head pastor is to walk around and bless those who are actually doing the work of the church; I don't bless the way the Pope does, of course, I do it the way a Presbyterian minister does—I sidle up to someone while I'm holding a coffee cup, and say "Thank you for doing this, I really appreciate it." So that's what I did to the member who was sitting on the stool right by the door, greeting clients, taking their names telling them how the process works, and showing them into the chapel to await the next step.

"Thank you for doing this—I really appreciate it."

And what she said in response was so beautiful so simple but so beautiful: "Really, Richard, I love this work—I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

She really said that: freely, joyously, wholeheartedly, and unprompted.

The Lord has proclaimed: they shall be called, "the Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord"; and you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."

So this is why we do good works and this is why we come forward today: to pay it forward, to be a sort of Christ to our neighbor, to express our gratitude to God, to do the work of the church, to receive the blessing, the unspeakable riches, of our Lord.

And as we are about to come forward, let me say to the ushers, and to all of you: "Thank you for doing this, I really appreciate it."

And since last Wednesday was All Saints Day, let me add one more reason that we come forward which is not really another reason at all but only a different way of saying the same thing: we come forward today to acknowledge the holy ones, those grace-overflowing heroes whose holiness has touched our lives. As Bob Knechel said a few weeks back, they are still here all around us, this great cloud of witnesses; we only need open our hearts to see them.

Or as the hymn we are about to sing puts it: *Give thanks for the past—for those who had vision; give thanks for the now—for worship, for mission; give thanks for tomorrow—full of surprises.*

As the Spirit calls us, growing the legacy we've inherited.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.