

**Clackamas United Church of Christ**  
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**Sermon 1.13.19**

Why Christianity Is Not About Being Good

When I was in seminary, I had to take a class on the Old Testament. I enjoyed that class, but there was one thing about it that really annoyed me. It started at 8 am! It was the earliest class at the seminary and everyone had to take it.

Now, I have always been a morning person. For some reason, when the clock hits 9:15 pm I am good for nothing. I have always been this way - even as a teenager I started getting tired at around 9 pm. I'm usually in bed at 9:45, which means I tend to wake up at 6:15 every morning.

So, the fact that this Old Testament class was at 8 am didn't bother. What did bother me was that at almost every class there was one guy who always arrived 15 minutes late!

We would start class and right in the middle of the instructor's introduction to the day's topic, this guy would walk into the classroom.

And do you know what I did? I shook my head at him. My mind started thinking, "Well, I get to class early! Everyone else usually gets here close to on time. You are so disruptive. Why can't you get here on time!"

And then my mind started to make up reasons for his tardiness. And those reasons were always negative. He must be lazy. He doesn't care about this class. He isn't here for the right reasons. He must be out partying every night. He is so disrespectful.

I don't know about you, but when someone else doesn't live up to my expectations, my mind often has an unconscious way of forming a negative judgment against them.

I remember talking with my wife Carrie at the time about this guy in my class. I told her how he always shows up late and that means he's lazy and doesn't care. And Carrie, in a moment of gentle but firm grace, looked me in the eyes and said, "You have no idea why he arrives late to class."

Something inside of me clicked. I knew she was right. I had no idea. The story my mind made up could have been totally wrong. I'm an extreme morning person. I get a lot of my work done in the morning because I know that I'm good for nothing in the evenings. Maybe he was an extreme night person and got a lot of his work done at night because he has a difficult time in the mornings. Or maybe he had children to drop off at school before coming to class.

The fact is that I had no idea why he arrived late to that morning class. But I do know what my judgment against him did to me.

It gave me a sense of goodness. It elevated me over him. I was able to think of myself as a good student because I could compare myself with him, whom I labeled as a bad student.

The anthropologist René Girard says that we all have an unconscious and natural tendency to compare ourselves with others. This can come in the form of consumerism - a kind of keeping up with the Joneses, where we fall into the trap of comparing our stuff with our neighbor's and trying to buy the shiny new object so we can gain social status.

But we can also compare our sense of goodness with others. I can start to think that I am doing so much for the cause of justice and others are just playing games and giving into the injustice of the world. Not only does that judgment against others lead me to feel good about myself in comparison to them, but it also leads to a deep-seated resentment towards others. And like the old saying claims, holding on to resentment is like drinking rat poison - it poisons my soul and it poisons my relationships.

Just as dangerous is that fact that when we gain a sense of goodness by comparing ourselves with others, we will never be good enough. When I was in seminary, deep down I knew the truth that my biggest fear was that I was not a good enough student. And the easiest way to know that I was good was to compare myself with someone else I labeled as bad.

When we fall into this trap, we become addicted to grasping for a sense of goodness. We want so desperately to be good or to be right or to be loved, that we go back to the ancient way of comparing ourselves with others. That's how we grasp for goodness. When you grasp for a handful of sand and hold it tight, the sand slips through your fingers. The same thing happens when we grasp for goodness. It slips right through our fingers.

That's because goodness is not something we can grasp. True goodness is not something we gain by comparing ourselves with others. True goodness is only something we can receive.

That leads us to today's reading because it's one of the great mysteries of baptism.

When Jesus was baptized, "the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven [saying], 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

I'm going to ask you a bit of a trick question: What did Jesus do in order to deserve the status of being God's Son? What did he have to do in order to please God? The answer is nothing.

Many people lament the fact that the Gospels don't tell us much about Jesus' life before his baptism. We get his birth, but then the Gospels basically skip the next 30 years of his life, which leads me to be curious about what he did during all those years. But for the Gospel writers, those 30 years don't really matter.

That's because Jesus didn't have to earn the status of God's Beloved Son. He didn't have to be a good enough person in order to please his Heavenly Father. That's because baptism is a public

statement of what was always and already true about Jesus from the time he was born - that he was the Beloved Son of God.

And here's what's important for us to know: what baptism says about Jesus, it also says about you. God claims you as God's beloved child. You can't earn that status by being good enough and you can't lose that status by being bad. It's who you are at the core of your being. You don't have to compare yourself with others. You don't have to earn it by striving to be good. And nobody can take that status away from you or from anyone else.

But what about the words of John the Baptist in this passage? He says that the Messiah is coming and "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

When you hear that fire language, does your mind go straight to images of hell? Typically, when we hear this we think it's saying that good people, in this metaphor, the wheat, will live eternally in heaven and bad people, or the chaff, will burn forever in the fires of hell. So, it seems to be warning that you better be good!

But that's not at all what John was saying. Grains of wheat are surrounded by a husk, or chaff. It's a hard shell with rough edges that protects the wheat. Wheat and chaff are originally one entity. They come together. But at the point when we want to harvest the wheat, we have to get rid of the chaff because it is no longer useful.

Here's the point - we all have wheat and chaff within us. And sometimes I feel pretty chaffy. And when I feel chaffy, I start getting judgmental toward others and I think, "Why can't that guy just show up to class on time?" Or "Why doesn't he care about the things I think are so obviously important?" Or, "Why doesn't she follow through on her commitments? I follow through on mine!" This judgment that I have against others is my chaff. It elevates me above them. It's a way of making me feel good at the expense of another. And it is the chaff inside of me that Jesus needs to separate from the wheat so that he can burn it away.

Our work for a more just world is vitally important. It's one of the great things that I love about this church. But our goodness, our belovedness, is not dependent upon our justice work. Nor is our goodness dependent upon being good enough or making a certain amount of money or the clothes we wear or our level of intelligence or how much work you do for the church or the social status we achieve.

Working for a better world is a good thing, but it doesn't make us good. In fact, it can become an obstacle in our walk with Christ when we compare ourselves with others. It's a form of grasping for goodness. And it's the chaff that Jesus needs to burn away.

Because the truth about baptism is that you are already a beloved child of God. And so is your neighbor. And so is the stranger. And as Jesus teaches, so is the enemy.

Baptism is a counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, and holy mystery. And if you hear anything from this sermon, I want you to hear this: Baptism reveals that Christianity is not about being good. It's about being loved.

I tell you this because I need to tell it to myself, too. Many pastors and religious people will tell you that the point is to be a good person. That's not the point! The point is that you are loved. So stop trying so hard to be good. Stop grasping for goodness because it will only put you in competition with others. And when we fall into this trap, we will always be grasping and thus we will never be good enough. And neither will anyone else.

Instead, I want to invite you to relax into your identity as God's beloved child because our only role is to open our hearts and receive the love of God. And when we do that, we no longer have to compare or compete with others for a sense of goodness because when we open our hearts to the love of God, the goodness of God begins to more naturally flow through us.

And so may we receive God's steadfast love for us and share it with others today and forevermore. Amen.