

"Do a Good Turn Daily"

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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I wonder....

I wonder what it would be like if we would *"Do a good turn daily?"* I mean, besides giving our detractors the opportunity to sneer, *"You're such a Boy Scout."* Unless you're a girl. In which case they might sneer, *"You're such a Girl Scout."* For, you see, on this Scouting Sunday we remember that both Boy and Girl Scouts have this as their slogan: *"Do a good turn daily."*

So I wonder....

Our Jewish sisters and brothers understand this well in the concept of mitzvah. The word actually means "commandment," so when a young man is a bar mitzvah or a young woman is a bat mitzvah they are a son or daughter of the commandment. As to specific commandments there are 613 in the Hebrew Bible.

Yet the concept of mitzvah is broader than that. To "do a mitzvah" is to perform a good act, a charitable act for someone else. It is to live out the essence of God's commandments, especially the two Jesus lifted up as paramount. Quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18, Jesus, the good Jew, instructed *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind...(and)...You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

So I wonder....

I wonder in these strident and angry times what it would mean if we, you and me, each of us in this sanctuary, were to promise – and then actually *"do"* – *"a good turn daily."*

I have to confess that I don't. Few among us are so focused on the things of God that we don't get caught up on the demands of living. Even those of us called to service professions are not exempt from neglecting to serve. Some of you know that I sometimes write, in response to some request, *"It is a privilege to serve."* And that I sometimes close a letter with *"Your servant in Christ."* These are not, as far as I know my own soul, false expressions of humility.

They are ways of reminding myself, as I near the end of my fifth decade of Christian service, that I am an ambassador for the religious values I espouse.

I touched last week on the hypocrisy that can come with faithfulness in worship. We worship, but fall short of worship's worthy goal of honoring and glorifying God. If anyone's conscience was troubled by that last week, buckle your seatbelt today! The prophet Isaiah simply lays into his people on behalf of God: *"Announce to my people their rebellion...day after day they delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God...."* (Isaiah 58:1b-2a) His 2,700 year old words reads like the morning news, the front page of the paper, or your Internet news feed:

- You serve your own interests (Isa. 58:3c)
- You oppress all your workers (Isa. 58:3d)
- You quarrel, fight and strike with a wicked fist (Isa. 58:4)
- You point the finger (Isa. 58:9d)
- You speak of evil (Isa. 58:9d)

The people are upset because God doesn't see their fasting and humility, but God says, *"Who are you kidding? There's nothing about your behavior that makes me think you are serious about honoring and glorifying me."*

Years ago a parishioner told me, *"I don't pray those unison prayers of confession because I don't do the things they say."* What a narrow, literalistic and self-serving interpretation of the call of faith! What a shriveled spirit she had, unable to see her sin and the need we all have to confess and be forgiven.

Here's the thing: on any given Sunday any one of us can say, "that doesn't apply to me." Maybe that's the case for you today with Isaiah's list, and you come out squeaky clean. But I guarantee you that on another day, with another list, you – or I – don't look so pretty.

Which is why I wonder....wonder how things might be different if we did a good turn daily?

If you like your sermons neat, here's a three-part intro to the second half of this message. It answers the question, *"So what?"* First, we needn't wonder. Second, doing a good turn is within the grasp of all of us. Third, being followers of Jesus is to live this way.

We needn't wonder. We needn't wonder how things might be different if we did a good turn daily. God is clear:

"If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places; and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." (Isa. 58:9c-11)

Our relationship with others reveals our relationship with God, and God blesses those who bless God: which is also a way of saying God blesses those who bless others. For those who find religious life confusing or irrelevant, the ethical demands of Isaiah's message are startlingly, bracingly and unmistakably clear. We don't have to wonder how things might be different if we did a good turn daily.

Second, doing a good turn is within the grasp of all of us. So you don't oppress your workers? You say you don't even have any workers? Think again. The last time you were in a restaurant, did you ask your servers name? Did you speak respectfully to them? In your hunger, and the impatience that can go with that to get your meal, did you consider the kind of day they were having? Since most, if not all, do not earn a living wage as wait staff, did you tip them? Having had three of my four sons serve in restaurants, and having served myself in food service and as wait staff throughout my college years, I am acutely aware of the bad behaviors of diners. Don't be them.

Haven't been in a restaurant lately? How about a drive-up? How did you speak to the person taking your order? If five cars were in line ahead of you, did you take it out on the person behind the intercom?

And speaking of drive-ups, how about this: if you have a few extra bucks in your pocket, how about paying for the person behind you?

Since I decided to preach on this theme, I decided to actually try to do it. It is more difficult than it sounds, but also not as big as it sounds. One day I moved a shopping cart that had been left in the middle of a parking lot into one of those areas near the grocery store where they are supposed to go. Another day it was rescheduling an appointment to the convenience of another. In the first instance, who knows if any good came from it or not. In the second, the respondent said "Thank you so much!"

How about serving at the Food Bank on Fridays, answering God's call to *"offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted."* (Isa. 58:10:a,b)

Or come up with your own list. Are you home-bound or otherwise not able to get out much? What word of kindness will you speak today that, in person or on the telephone, will lift the spirit of someone else? Are you able to pick up a pen? What word of encouragement will you write to someone? Find yourself thinking of someone? That's God's nudge to be in touch. *"Do a good turn daily"* is within the capacity of all of us. No exceptions.

Because this is how we are to live as followers of Jesus. That's the third and final response to the question, *"So what, pastor?"* If you're in this sanctuary, or if you're reading this message, and your heart is inclined to be a follower of Jesus, this is how we are to live.

Last Sunday Jesus talked about all the things that lead us to a state of "blessedness." (Matthew 5:1-12) That passage began this way:

"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak..." (Matt. 5:1-2a)

A few years ago the church I served brought in a consultant to meet with leaders and other stakeholders in the congregation. The consultant, a pastor with some years of experience, observed that many churches are comprised of *"disciples," "members," and "fans."* **Disciples** understand that following means sacrifice. **Members** want to understand, but also get "membership" confused with "entitlement" and "benefits" because that is what "membership" means in so many places. "Membership rewards" are common features of credit cards and other businesses that cultivate customer loyalty with benefits reserved only for frequent customers. **Fans** love a winner and dislike a loser. (And who are you rooting for in today's Super Bowl?) If things aren't going well, fans will be back when things get better.

So at any given moment, we are relating to all three groups at once – disciples, members and fans. This was the setting for Jesus' teaching. He saw the crowds – the fans, and maybe some members from the synagogue at Capernaum, near the mount; and nearby Nazareth, where Jesus launched his ministry (Luke 4:16-30). But note that his disciples also came to him.

So what did Jesus do? Did he water-down the Gospel? Did he call the Beatitudes the "Be-happy-attitudes," as a television preacher did some years

ago? No. He looked at the people – disciples, members and fans – and saw as God sees: *“You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.”* I want you to make that personal. Say it with me: *“**I** am the salt of the earth. **I** am the light of the world.”*

I wonder what a difference it will make. It could be tremendous. It could change the world. It will most certainly change both you and me to believe it.

And Jesus, ever practical, ever pragmatic, reminds us what it means to believe it. If we are salt, we are preservers of the best and add flavor to all we encounter. Losing that, not much is left. If we are light, we are not to hide. We are to shine. And God, whose lights we are, will put us in a place where our light will illumine all.

We visited with our next-door-neighbor last night. She picked up our mail while we were away. She is a white woman whose late husband was Indian and whose children are biracial. We spoke of the racial animosity that has found new voice in our time. Speaking of her daughter who lives in Washington, D.C., Linda said, *“Yes, Samira was traveling on the subway with a friend who is Muslim and was wearing a hijab. Two men came up to them and said ‘Go back to where you came from.’”*

Carol and I were horribly distressed and expressed this, especially knowing Samira’s kind spirit.

Linda continued, *“Ah, but the story doesn’t end there. Four other men got up from their seats, inserted themselves in front of Samira and her friend, and faced the two men. One of the four then addressed the two saying ‘So, do you want to tell ME where to go back to?’”* The two cowards backed down.

Doing a good turn daily helps us live into being disciples that are salt and light, that want to liberate and not oppress, who desire to know God and make God known. Doing a good turn daily is a discipline, a commitment, a state of mind that not only makes us good Boy and Girl Scouts, but shapes us into the pattern of the One whom we follow. Doing a good turn daily helps us realize our congregation’s Vision that our Lay Leaders reminded us in their report last week: *“to be a more thriving, open-minded, Spirit-filled Christian fellowship growing in faith, love and service.”*

Let’s do it! Amen.