

SELAH

SERMON STARTER

SELAH: PAUSE AND PONDER...“GOODNESS”

WEEK ONE: Psalm 27:12-14; Romans 15:13-15

I invite you to practice Selah (See-lah) with me. This word appears 71 times in the Psalms, but it is still not very familiar to many of us. When we seek its meaning and how it is used in the Psalms, it seems to be calling the reader or the hearer to “pause and reflect.” Considering the pace of the lives many of us live, and the state of the world in which we live those lives, I think it’s a word whose time has come!

So, “pause and ponder” with me the word *GOODNESS* (pause). What comes to your mind? (pause) What images do you see? (pause) Whose faces do you see? (Pause) What emotions do you feel as you contemplate the word? (pause)

How would you define *goodness*? In some ways, isn’t it like trying to define the word “five” – hard to define it without using the word itself?

In 1964, the Supreme Court was hearing a free speech case that required some common definition of the term “obscenity”; Justice Potter Stewart said “I won’t attempt to define it, but I know it when I see it.” Maybe that’s a way for us to handle the word goodness. “I won’t try to define it, but I know it when I see it.”

Isn’t that really where goodness becomes real for us, in what we see? If I come up to you and say, “I’m full of goodness,” I doubt I’d convince a single one of you unless you saw something in how I act that leads you to believe that there is, in fact, goodness in me.

If you go online to search the Bible and look for the word goodness, you’ll find lots of passages referenced. However, throughout the Old Testament, every reference I found was pointing to the goodness of God, not people. Maybe the understanding is that goodness is a characteristic of God; and in the community of the Hebrews, it is something people can aspire to, but not achieve? In Psalm 27, verse 13 (NIV), the writer states, “I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” Still, the focus is God’s goodness; but the hope and confidence are that God’s goodness might be reflected in the people who love him and follow him.

Let me highlight the truth in that: nobody will be convinced that God is good unless they see goodness in those of us who love God. Pause and ponder that.

¹Movie Day at the Supreme Court or “I Know It When I See It”: A History of the Definition of Obscenity
<https://corporate.findlaw.com/litigation-disputes/movie-day-at-the-supreme-court-or-i-know-it-when-i-see-it-a.html>

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In the faith tradition of our Jewish sisters and brothers, there is an interesting teaching about charity (Hebrew word Tzedakah) written by a prolific Jewish scholar from the twelfth century named Moses Maimonides. He defined eight levels of giving, sometimes called Maimonides' ladder. ²Picture the rungs of the ladder, from the bottom going up:

8. *Giving donations grudgingly.*
7. *Giving less than one should but doing so cheerfully.*
6. *Giving directly to the poor upon being asked.*
5. *Giving directly to the poor without being asked.*
4. *Giving when the recipient is aware of the donor's identity, but the donor still doesn't know the specific identity of the recipient.*
3. *Giving when the donor is aware to whom the charity is being given, but the recipient is unaware of the source.*
2. *Giving assistance in such a way that the giver and recipient are unknown to each other. Communal funds, administered by responsible people, are also in this category.*
1. *Helping sustain people before they become impoverished by offering a substantial gift in a dignified manner, or by extending a suitable loan, or by helping them find employment or establish themselves in business so it is unnecessary for them to become dependent on others. This is considered the highest form of charity.*

There are some who might debate a couple of the steps on the ladder and whether the order should be different, but one thing about Maimonides' Ladder jumps out at me clearly: the two highest rungs of the ladder clearly are what United Methodists do—week in and week out – when a part of our offering goes to cooperative, connectional mission work through our district and our annual conference, and through the mission, outreach, and advocacy of the global United Methodist Church. We are helping people we may never meet; we are helping students at Africa University grow in faith and learn skills to improve their lives, their communities, and countries. We help people we never meet by sponsoring agricultural programs that help people grow sustainable crops and feed themselves and their neighbors before hunger comes to their doorstep. Through medical missions, personnel, and supplies, we are not just curing illness but preventing disease through insecticide-treated bed nets, and we are educating people about how to live healthier lives.

Pause and ponder *goodness*...(pause)

Let me say it again: Nobody will be convinced that God is good unless, he or she sees goodness in those of us who love God.

Paul writes to the church in Rome: “¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁴I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another.” (Romans 15: 13-15 NIV).

²<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/maimonides-ladder-of-tzedakah/>

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Now, more than at any other time, our work as the church needs to be about reconnecting people to God and reminding them of God's goodness and love, even in the midst of the turmoil of our world. People are not persuaded by our talk about goodness. They are looking to see goodness in the way we live. We may wonder, how do they define *goodness*?

"I won't try to define it, but I know it when I see it." ■

In case you would like to expand this sermon into a series:

SELAH: PAUSE AND PONDER... "GRACE"

WEEK TWO: Psalm 45:1-3;
John 1:14-18; Acts 15:10-12

Pause and ponder; linger in that word "grace." We use the word in many forms: something graceful is beautiful, intricate, delicate. If someone is gracious, we think of that person as being generous, maybe extravagantly kind. In Psalm 45, the phrase "your lips have been anointed with grace" in context seems not to be referring to speech that is deeply truthful. In Acts 15:10-12, grace is different; grace is a route to salvation that doesn't require keeping the letter of the law. Grace is a gift, given with no strings attached. Then, in the first chapter of John's gospel, the writer describes the nature of the incarnate God: "the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Here, grace seems synonymous with love.

SELAH: PAUSE AND PONDER... "GIVING"

WEEK Three: Psalm 37:18-24;
2 Corinthians 8:1-14

I hope it's clear to the preacher why pausing and pondering "giving" is the third stop on this journey. Our lives reflect God's goodness. God's love comes to us, not because we have been so good that we earned it, but through God's grace. Understanding this is essential. When we realize that gratitude is the foundation upon which authentic stewardship is built, we can begin to ponder the word "giving." You might want to revisit Maimonides' Ladder, and while it is not part of our Christian tradition, we should consider how it makes us feel about our giving. You may take on some of the hard questions: "When is giving more about pleasing ourselves than God? How does the institution become so focused on our need for money that we neglect the importance of the disciple's need to give? When does charity move from being the solution to the need in the world to being part of the problem?"

SELAH: PAUSE AND PONDER... "GRATITUDE"

WEEK FOUR: Psalm 147:6-8;
Luke 17:11-19

Pause to ponder the word "gratitude." One of the foundational pillars of Christian stewardship is understanding that God gives first – any gift we give, any sacrifice we offer, any property or asset we develop or manage or donate is in our response to God. If we don't get that right, it is so easy to lead people to believe that God is responding to our giving, rewarding the generous, and treating the big donors with more money magically coming their way (also known as prosperity gospel). Not to oversimplify, but if stewardship is not built on an unmovable foundation of gratitude, it is destined to go off the rails – sooner rather than later.