

## “A Pretty Good Person is Pretty Good”

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*It's so good to be with you today, to share together in this service of worship on a beautiful Sunday morning in Los Angeles, and I'm especially grateful that today is a Communion Sunday, because at the heart of our Communion Service is the experience of welcome. God's welcome of us and our welcome of one another.*

*But I'm glad we're sharing in Communion for another reason today, and it's because many of us experience the sacred at that moment of the breaking bread and sharing of the cup. But I've also noticed through the years that many of us struggle with our sense of worthiness around taking Communion. I cannot begin to tell you how many people through the years have said to me, in one way or another, "May I take Communion at your church? I'm not sure I'm really worthy of taking Communion. I'm not a member of the church, but am I welcome to take Communion?" All of these questions in one way or another go to the heart of goodness. What does it mean to be a good person?*

*And that's what I want to talk to you about for a few minutes this morning. I want to talk about the difference between being good and being pretty good. Now that might not sound like much of a difference to you, but I think you'll see that this difference is critical. I'm talking about being good versus being pretty good.*

*Here's what I mean. Being a good person is a goal. It's an ideal. It's a lofty ideal. Unfortunately, for many of us here today, we often experience what I would call the dark side of goodness. What do I mean by that? I mean instead of letting goodness be a lofty goal toward which we aspire, goodness becomes a punishing measuring stick of our worthiness as a human being. This hurts us in a couple of different ways . . .*

*If we are good, or if we think of ourselves as good, then we're happy with ourselves. You might say we are satisfied with ourselves. You might say we are proud of ourselves. Happy and satisfied and proud. But there's a dark side to it. Because if we are happy and satisfied and proud of our personal goodness, we can easily cross a line and become smug, or we think we're better than others, or we think we're always right, or we become so self-righteous that we are unbearable to everyone around us. This is goodness in the worst sense of the word.*

*On the other hand, a few of us grew up in homes where religious goodness became a standard for our personal worthiness as human beings. If we were good and made good grades, then we were worthy. If we were good and didn't smoke and drink and do drugs and have sex, then we were worthy. If we were*

*good and went to church every Sunday, then we were worthy. If we were good and stayed out of trouble and got into college, then we were worthy.*

*The problem is that as human beings we don't always reach our lofty goals of goodness. I'm not saying we shouldn't try. I'm just saying that trying to be a good person should not be oppressive. Trying to be a good person should not be tied to our worthiness as human beings. Sometimes people do drink too much. And sometimes teenage girls do get pregnant. And sometimes people do use drugs. And sometimes people don't study and don't make good grades and don't get into a good college. But that doesn't mean these people are devoid of goodness. When goodness and worthiness are tied together, that becomes a dangerous thing, and it happens a lot in the name of God.*

*This is why I like the idea of being a pretty good person. There's nothing oppressive about being pretty good. When you're pretty good, you always know you have room for improvement. You don't have to go around feeling superior to everyone. You can let go of the judgment of others, because you know you have room to grow yourself. But it also means you are not oppressed by the fact that you are not perfect.*

*In other words, you don't have to live in shame. You don't have to live with self-loathing. You don't have to live feeling you are unworthy. Because you can make peace with the reality that you are pretty good. Not perfectly good but pretty good. And I can tell you from my own experience that there's nothing more oppressive than living with personal disappointment in yourself.*

*Now, the person who really helped unlock this idea was Donald Winnicott. He was a pediatrician from London, and he kept seeing young mothers who were feeling oppressed by motherhood. They felt like they were not good enough. They felt like they were failing with their children. They felt like they were always making mistakes. And they also felt emotional ambivalence about being moms.*

*Winnicott developed the idea of the "good enough mother." And the idea was that there's a difference between being a good mother – that's idealism – versus the good enough mother – that's being a real person with your child. A good enough mother is dedicated to her child, but also has moments of ambivalence or even resentment. A good enough mother loves her child, but she also has room to love others. A good enough mother can feel great affection for her child, but also anger over the limitations a child might place upon her life. Yet what Winnicott argued was that the best mother is an imperfect mother, because an imperfect mother is real.*

*Being pretty good is real. Being all good, forever good, always good is not real. It's a false kind of goodness, and in the end it's personally oppressive to our souls. You really see this when a public figure has a scandal in his or her life. You can take a television evangelist, for example, like Jim Bakker. Remember him? He made a career on television trying to project perfect goodness to his followers, but it all came crumbling down when some of his personal flaws were*

*revealed to the world. No one can be perfectly good all the time. We can be pretty good, but not perfectly good.*

*There's an adage in Jungian psychology that goes like this: "The brighter the light, the darker the shadow." That's just a realistic way of saying that no one can radiate goodness every single minute of every single day.*

*Now, I want to tie this to our reading today from the book of Micah, because it's one of my favorite readings in the entire Bible. We're called to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. I'm not sure there's a better summary for the life of faith than that. Justice. Mercy. Humility.*

*Justice means we care about what is happening to our neighbor. And not just to our neighbor, but to the planet. Mother Earth is calling out for justice right now. Justice means that Christians deserve fairness. But Jews deserve fairness. And Muslims deserve fairness. Justice means that African Americans deserve fairness. And women deserve fairness. And children and the elderly deserve fairness. And don't you think that people who want to come to our country and who are properly vetted, don't you think it's a just thing that they be allowed to come to our country? If we call ourselves people of faith, then God calls us to love justice.*

*Have you seen the movie Hidden Figures yet? It's a good one. It's about a group of African American women who worked for NASA back in the early days of the space program, but they had to overcome prejudice in order to make their contributions. One of those women was absolutely brilliant, and without her we would not have launched John Glenn into space.*

*But she had to run a half a mile from her office to another building on campus every time she needed to go to the bathroom, because there was no "colored" bathroom in her building. At a certain point, the head of the program, played by Kevin Costner, took a sledge hammer and knocked down the "whites only" sign for the bathroom. He said we're a team and we're working together on this project and there's no place for black and white in his program. That's justice. We may not be able to do justice perfectly, but we can do justice in a good enough way.*

*The same is true for mercy. Mercy means that when our neighbor falls short, we offer a second chance. Mercy is realistic. At the heart of mercy is the recognition that everyone makes mistakes. Parents make mistakes. Kids make mistakes. Husbands and wives make mistakes. Church members make mistakes. But mercy means we hang onto one another, despite our flaws and foibles and human mistakes. And so we practice mercy. Not perfectly. But genuinely and sincerely. It's pretty good mercy.*

*And humility is key, because when we are in touch with our humility, we can easily share mercy. But if we're not in touch with it ourselves, then we will never see the need to help our neighbor. If you've ever been part of a recovery group, you know the reason why it works is that no one feels as if he or she is better than anyone else.*

*People in AA are so helpful to others because they have been there. They have humility. They live one day at a time, knowing they are one decision away from a downward spiral. And so when they meet someone who needs some help – they help – because it's the kind of help that comes from humility. Humility is not putting ourselves down. Humility is not poor self-esteem. Humility means we recognize that we all fall short and that no one is perfect except for God; and its awareness that I have been there too.*

*And so friends . . . what I want you to think about is this . . . love justice when you can. Share mercy as often as possible. Live with humility before God and your neighbor. And most of all remember this . . . that being a pretty good person is, well, it's pretty good. I love you all. Amen.*