

NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/no-good-deed-goes-unpunished/>

Have you ever been excited about a new opportunity to serve in the church, only to feel you are kicked in the teeth when you try to do your new job? Have you ever gone the extra mile for someone—no, make that 7.5 miles—and watched while someone else got the credit or you were ignored? Have you ever looked around and realized you're not the popular one? You're not cool, you're too old, not necessary, outdated?

The Apostle Paul is laying his heart open in our scripture for this morning. He had established the church (Acts 18), working into the middle of the night as a tentmaker, to earn income, so all day long he could work with people, train, teach, disciple them. The Jews had driven him out of the synagogue. He was brought before authorities on trumped up charges. His leadership was challenged, they tried to poke holes in his message, he was criticized, had his motives and credentials questioned (“he’s not a real apostle, you know”). Truly, no good deed goes unpunished!

In vv. 4-5, Paul mentions some of his struggles. The hardships named in v. 4 are wounds (physical and emotional). In that same verse, the word “calamities” comes from the Greek word from which we get our word “stenosis,” as in stenosis of the spine, a narrowing, constricting pressure.

Then, in vv. 8-10, Paul takes on his critics and detractors. He turns their argument on its head. The mistreatment and hardships of Paul and others does not disqualify them for Christian service; it qualifies them. He challenges them by declaring that their way of measuring success is not God’s way. The Christ event changed it all, flipped it around (2 Cor. 5:16-17). He makes clear that in contrast to their masks and pretending, he plans to simply be real. Our congregation discovered in our discernment and strategic planning (Setting Sail) that people are longing for authentic relationships; people are tired of pretending. Eugene Peterson tells the story of a five-year-old girl named Charity, plump, bold, cute and highly verbal. One of her grandmothers had just gone after a long visit. This grandmother was very stern, religious and serious. When Charity’s second grandmother arrived for her turn to visit, Charity crawled up in her lap, cuddled her and said, “Grandma, let’s not have any godtalk while you’re here, OK? I believe God is everywhere, so let’s get on with life.” [*The Pastor*, p. 240].

Until the masks come off, there is no healing in our own lives, no authentic ministry to others. Henri Nouwen wrote about his ministry among the most severely disabled. He said their disability unveiled his own. Their vulnerability revealed his. It was their gift. Someone said wrinkles mean you laughed; gray hair means you cared; scars mean you lived. Let’s remember. We follow a Savior who has scars. “...ignored by the world, but recognized by God; terrifically alive, though rumored to be dead; beaten within an inch of our lives, but refusing to die; immersed in tears, yet always filled with deep joy; having nothing, having it all” (vv. 9-10, *The Message*).

At a recent funeral I officiated, I saw the beautiful construction paper scrawlings of the grandchildren's notes to their grandma. Words were misspelled. Sentences ran off the page. Sentences ran downhill. But tell me. Would that grandma have rather had a perfectly spelled, typed letter, with justified margins? Not on your life. The love relationship was more important than flawlessness. Not having to be perfect frees us up to be good, and it frees us up to DO good. A friend of mine once said he didn't have much joy in Christian work until he stopped trying to please people and began serving God. Then, he said, it was like a wellspring of strength inside him. Even though no good deed goes unpunished, we can keep on serving and loving others.

Some of you have heard these amazing words from Kent Keith: "People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered. Love them anyway. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help them anyway. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best anyway." Amen.