

For Goodness Sake: A Theology of Good

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This sermon is the fourth in a series of six sermons on theology. Last month's sermon was about evil, so this month I'm following up with some thoughts about good.

“Goodness”

I can't think about “goodness” without recalling the 1932 Mae West film “Night after Night.” Mae West plays the role of gangster's moll Maudie Tippet. As Maudie enters a nightclub draped in diamonds, the “hat check girl” exclaims “Goodness, what lovely diamonds!” Mae answers, famously (and please join in if you remember the line): “Goodness had nothing to do with it.”

Let's consider the *source* of good and what good *requires of us*. When I say “good,” I mean goodness in the sense of being helpful and compassionate toward others.²

The Source of Good

The traditional assumption is that God is the influence for positive growth in the universe. Most theologians say that good is what happens when we respond to God.

Let's broaden the perspective a little, in the spirit of Emerson's observation that “Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All.” In Buddhist theology, the idea of God is irrelevant; yet most people would agree that the Dalai Lama is a “good” person. We can think theologically about “Good” whether or not we start with “God.”

The Dalai Lama says that the “roots of all goodness lie in the soil of appreciation for goodness.”

That's a way of saying that we respond to goodness; we recognize goodness when we see it; we appreciate goodness. The more we notice and appreciate goodness, the more we are inclined to be good ourselves. When people respond to the idea of “the Good,” it's a *good* thing; when they don't, it's—not good.

Goodness happens when we respond to Good.

In a way, that's what evolutionary biologists have been telling us for years. Evolutionary biologists are interested in the genetic or biological basis for “altruism.” Altruistic behavior appears not just in humans but in a wide variety of creatures, though it's most noticeable in more complex beings that have some level of sentience.

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² **G. K. Chesterton**: “The word 'good' has many meanings. For example, if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man.” **W. H. Auden**: “We are here on earth to do good for others. What the others are here for, I don't know.”

To an evolutionary biologist, “altruism” means helpfulness that has some cost to the helper, and may even decrease the helper’s chances for survival in the world of tooth and claw.

Whether it’s a tribe of monkeys, a colony of prairie dogs, or a village of humans, altruistic behavior is a survival trait. It’s a survival trait in the evolutionary sense even if it puts a particular individual at risk. As a result of hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, goodness is, to some extent, in our genetic make-up.

Over the vast periods of time that preceded our being here today, natural selection favored humans who “genuinely do care about helping others.”³ For example, there is an evolutionary advantage associated with parents taking good care of their children. “Parents who *really do* care about their children’s welfare” do better at taking care of them (and their genetic material survives better), than “parents who only pretend to care, or who do not care.”⁴

So evolution favors goodness, and it’s in our genes. But in the complex psyche of the human being, goodness is more than biology. In a village filled with altruists, a person who acts selfishly can gain an advantage—as biologists say, can be a “free rider” on the goodness of others.⁵

Biology + Choice: Nudging the Paradigm Shift

With our ability to think and reflect, our ability to envision a better world, we can make conscious choices to serve the Good. Or not. But we must think, and we must choose if we aspire to be “good.”

This is the Dalai Lama’s point. Part of Buddhist meditation is to consider and appreciate the good qualities of others. Remembering the occasions when we have witnessed goodness, especially the times when someone has been good to us, inspires us to go and do likewise.

In this way, each decision that promotes the Good serves as an influence toward Goodness, and encourages others toward empathy, compassion, and altruism.⁶

But when we look around us at the way the world is today, it’s hard to argue that Earth is a planet filled with altruists.

Nonetheless, there are some positive signs. Communications technology, especially the Internet, is “boosting altruism and establishing a global consciousness. It is encouraging to see how easily individual acts of altruism can have a global impact.”⁷

³ Sanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/altruism-biological>.

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⁵ “Free rider”: In a system of public transport where people purchase tickets or passes but only rarely is there an enforcement official present (for example, the system in Geneva, Switzerland), most riders do buy tickets; there are always a few “free riders” who don’t, thus taking advantage of the conscientiousness of the majority of riders, whose fares keep the transportation system in operation.

⁶ At a conference on process theology a few years ago, I wondered out loud what process theology would be like if we did **not** assume the “lure of god” as an influence. The reaction to my question suggested that it was incoherent. Certainly the process theology of the early 20th century assumed “god” and daringly (at the time) posited a creative process in which humans take part. A hundred years later, perhaps we have the liberty of asking what a universe in process would be like if we were to make no assumptions about the nature or role of god. It is, after all, a question similar to the one Darwin asked.

Martin Luther King believed that humanity is at an important transitional point in our history. He said: “[O]ur world is in transition now. Our whole world is facing a revolution,” a non-violent revolution, toward what is right and good.⁸

Humanity may be at a transition point, approaching a paradigm shift that will bless our planet with Goodness. But despite the biological impulse toward goodness,, within every human heart there is also the potential to be a “free rider” on the goodness of others: to be silent and safe when others are in need. The paradigm shift to a better world won’t happen without the conscious and intentional choice of people who are willing to act, to “nudge” the paradigm shift.

Looking In to Reach Out

But in our own lives, in the deepest places of the heart, how do we choose to be good? Because most of the time it’s not a matter of choosing between good and evil; it’s more a matter of being good instead of being a free rider. How can we gradually become people who, more and more often, see and choose to do what is “good”?

Zachary Bonner is an American philanthropist who has received numerous national awards for his efforts to help homeless children. His charity is called “The Little Red Wagon Foundation.” His birthday is Tuesday; he will be 12 years old.

Zach started on his philanthropic path at the age of six, pulling a little red wagon to collect water bottles to help people whose homes were devastated by Hurricane Charlie. Through his efforts and the efforts of the people he inspired, he collected the equivalent of 27 *pick-up trucks* full of water. Zach’s plan for his 12th year of life on this planet is to walk coast-to-coast to raise awareness for projects that help street children.

I like this example of a child who so effectively “walks the walk” of goodness. Children bring a kind of simplicity to the idea of being good. In a way, to “be good” is what we adults insist upon. Like Zach, they can bring a clear vision to the needs of the world. Clear vision sometimes isn’t so easy for adults. To us life seems so much more complex. It is complex, of course, but sometimes the complications can deter us from simple goodness.

Goodness Requires Liberation

Goodness requires liberation. It can’t be achieved without a letting-go of all the ills and concerns and anxieties that plague us moment-to-moment, day-to-day. There must be in our consciousness an intentional release of *self*-consciousness (about who we are and how well we are doing). Without liberation, the intent to be good is overwhelmed by the distracting factors of guilt, anxiety, ambition, self-doubt, and fear of failure.

Pablo Casals, the Spanish cellist, says: “Each person has inside a basic decency and goodness. If he listens to it and acts on it, he is giving a great deal of what it is the world needs most. It is not

⁷ For example, Magnatune, Wikipedia, “freeware” and “shareware,” and websites that generate grassroots action for good causes. “In spite of massive investment by the corporate world, a mentality shift in the IT sphere is well underway from scarcity to abundance.” Altruists International, <http://www.altruists.org/about/altruism>.

⁸ The entire quote is: “There is a power in love that our world has not discovered yet. Jesus discovered it centuries ago. Mahatma Gandhi of India discovered it a few years ago, but most men and most women never discover it. For they believe in hitting for hitting; they believe in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; they believe in hating for hating; but Jesus comes to us and says, “This isn’t the way.” And this morning, I think of the fact that our world is in transition now. Our whole world is facing a revolution.”

complicated but it takes courage. It takes courage for a person to listen to his own goodness and act on it.”⁹

Goodness begins with a calm commitment to self-respect and a centered focus on what is needed, now, wherever we find ourselves. Goodness begins with the first step off the high dive. All kinds of fear keep us from letting go. But it has to be done. And there’s no going back.

Goodness moves us forward, to a different place inside ourselves and in the world. It liberates us and the others we meet.¹⁰

And so I end, heart-felt, with the words of W. E. B. DuBois: The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.¹¹

For goodness sake.

⁹ Pablo Casals, most likely from *Joys and Sorrows: Reflections by Pablo Casals* (as told to Albert E. Kahn) (Simon & Schuster; 1st Edition, April 15, 1970), quoted in *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* <http://www.answers.com/topic/pablo-casals>.

¹⁰ In the precautionary words of Robert Heinlein (1907-1988) (and a sermon for another day): “But goodness alone is never enough. A hard cold wisdom is required, too, for goodness to accomplish good. Goodness without wisdom invariably accomplishes evil.” *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Putnam, First Edition 1961). The quote appears on page 415 of the Ace 1987 edition (49th printing).

Back to the subject of goodness, I especially like what Mary Oliver (1935-) says: “You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.” *Dream Work* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986). This idea expresses, in essence, the “liberation” required for goodness: the letting go of worry, effort, and fear.

If the whole project of “goodness” sounds impossible, recall that Theodore Parker (1810-1860), the 19th century Unitarian minister, said: “Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long.” From “Justice and the Conscience,” a sermon Parker preached in 1853. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) summed it up a century later: “The arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.” (King used this expression many times, in many speeches and sermons; the last time was his March 31, 1968 sermon in the National Cathedral, four days before his assassination. See Arthur Howe, *Open Salon*, “The Arc of the Universe is Long but it Bends Toward Justice” (Jan. 19, 2009), at http://open.salon.com/blog/arthur_howe.)

¹¹ W.E.B. DuBois (1863-1963), sociologist and Black activist; quotation is from *Prayers for Dark People* (Univ. of Mass., 1980). This is a compilation of prayers DuBois kept private during his life.