The Sort of Person Everybody Wants to Be

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 28, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Lewis Smedes writes, "Deep in every healthy person's heart simmers a longing to be a good person." Smedes goes on to say that the desire to be a good person struggles with three other very strong desires: The urge to *feel* good, the urge to *make* good, and the urge to *look* good. Let's take a brief look at these three desires.

Feeling good! One of the strongest desires in human nature is the desire to feel good. But that desire can be perverted. Advertising promises satisfaction to our urge to feel good. For example, a popular beer commercial shows a group of men camping out. All of a sudden the Swedish bikini team shows up with cases of beer. Life can't get much better. The urge to feel good can sometimes destroy our desire to be good.

Then there's the urge to look good. The urge to look good fuels a billion dollar economy in diet and exercise paraphernalia. We buy expensive designer clothes and spend $150 for sneakers to hear friends say, "You look fantastic!" The urge to look good can silence our desire to be good.

Then there's the desire to make good. To earn a million dollars. To work our way to the top of our profession. To make it big. The urge to make good is often driven not so much by healthy ambition but by the religion of success. The desire to make good can overcome our desire to be good.

These three urges find their way into the church. When the urge to feel good predominates in the church we ignore the hard

sayings of Jesus: deny yourself, take up your cross, sell what you have and give to the poor, forgive your enemies. These hard sayings don't make us feel good so we ingore them. And the urge to look good was the great temptation of the pharisees. They wanted others to see how religious they were. Modern pharisees are still controlled primarily by the desire to look good. And the urge to make good has destroyed or perverted the ministry of spiritually gifted men and women like Jim Baker.

The prophet Micah lived at a time when the desire to feel good, to look good, and to make good drown the desire to be good in the hearts of God's people. Micah lived about 700 years before Christ. He was a contemporary of Isaiah. He lived in the southern kingdom of Judah. He witnessed the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria in 722 B.C. Read the whole book of Micah. He describes the idle rich who exploit the poor and defenseless. Their purpose in life was to feel good and to make good. They sacrificed sheep and goats in order to look good. God has a controversy with you, Micah said.

God also has a controversy with us. He warns us not to put too much stock on religious externals. For example, it's not required that we complete the sanctuary. I want it to be completed, but it's not required. Nor is it required that we worship either in the traditional way, as we are this morning, or in a more contemporary way, like we did two weeks ago. I'd like a worship service that includes both the contemporary and the traditional. But God doesn't require a particular style of worship. What the Lord requires is that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God whether we're in the sanctuary or down here in the fellowship hall;

and whether we worship in a traditional or contemporary way. In other words God wants us to be good. He doesn't want us simply to feel good or to look good or to make good. He wants us to be good.

God has shown us what is good. We need to be shown what's good. So many people today don't know what's good. So many people believe that it's judgmental to label behavior as good or sinful. ~~Harold~~ Alan Bloom, a professor at the University of Chicago, writes "almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative." Goodness is relative. Goodness is a matter of opinion. There is no right or wrong. He's concerned that there's no consensus in the United States about what's good and he fears that democracy is being undermined as a result.

Recently I've noticed a growing interest in the importance of being good. Former Secretary of Education, William Bennett, published his Book of Virtues. It contains stories that illustrate the virtues of self discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, honesty and faith. But Republicans don't have a monopoly on virtue. Robert Bellah, from a more liberal perspective writes, "Our problems today are not just political. They are moral...." And then he quotes the 19th century Frenchman, Alexis DeTocqueville, who said that when America stops being good, America will stop being great.

There's a growing consensus among Democrats and Republicans that all the money, and all the technological expertise, and all the sociological fact gathering in the world won't stop the violence and put an end to poverty unless we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Now I want to show you two people who I believe illustrate what it means to be a good person

When I think of a good person I think of Ruby Bridges. Around 1954 Ruby was a six year old Black girl living in New Orleans. A federal judge ordered the city to open its public schools to Black children. Ruby was the first Black child to go to a public school in New Orleans. Every morning Ruby walked, head up, eyes ahead, straight through the angry crowd. Two U.S. marshals walked ahead of her and two walked behind her.

A white school teacher described what she saw when Ruby Bridges walked into school: "A woman spat at Ruby but missed; Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her; Ruby smiled at him. Then she walked up the stairs, and she stopped and turned and smiled one more time! You know what she told one of the marshals? She told him she prays for those people, the ones in the mob, every night before she goes to sleep." Ruby shows us how a little girl did what was right, loved kindness, and walked humbly to school with her God. That's what a good person does. (From Smedes, A Pretty Good Person).

When I think of a good person I also think of a towering figure in the history of our nation. John Winthrop was one of the first puritans to land on our shores. He was elected first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He preached a sermon in Salem harbor right before landing in 1630. He said, "We must delight in each other, make others conditions our own, rejoyce together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body." What if more of our political leaders talked that way? What if more of our talk show hosts talked that way?

Winthrop was a man who did justice, loved kindness and walked humbly with his God. During an especially long and hard winter a

poor man in his neighborhood was caught stealing from Winthrop's woodpile. Winthrop called the man into his presence and told him that because of the severity of the winter and his need, he had permission to supply himself from Winthrop's woodpile for the rest of the cold season. Thus, he said to his friends, did he effectively cure the man from stealing (as quoted in Bellah's, Habits of the Heart). These are just two examples. Think of other examples... from work, from school, from your neighborhood, newspaper. Talk about what it means to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly at school, home, work, community, church

What if we shared that concept of justice and kindness and humility? God's people need to be reminded constantly to be good and to do good. It doesn't come naturally. Christians are not automatically good. Christians don't have a monopoly on goodness. Christians need to be taught to be good. We need to practice being good. Becoming good is like learning to play basketball. It's like learning to play the piano. It's like learning to lay bricks. It takes hard work. It takes discipline. And it doesn't happen if we're interested mainly in feeling good, and looking good, and making good. It can't be learned only from books. It requires hard work.

The church that exists primarily to make people feel good, and look good, and make good - is an apostate church. It has fallen away from what God intends it to be. A Christian who comes to worship primarily to feel good or look good or make good is spiritually sick. A healthy church and healthy Christians want to be good. We want to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

A good person isn't a perfect person. The best people I know still deal with a lot of moral rubbish in their lives. Good people still sometimes tell lies, sometimes express anger in inappropriate ways, sometimes deeply hurt people they love. When we confess our

poverty of spirit and we mourn and we hunger and thirst for righteousness. So being a good person doesn't mean being a perfect person. Being a good person is a process. Christians who know and love the Lord are on our way to becoming a good person.

I long for a more inclusive worship service that will make us all feel good - but unless we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, our worship, whether traditional or contemporary, will be loathsome to God. And I long for a beautiful sanctuary, a sanctuary that really looks good. But a beautiful sanctuary is worthless unless we do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God. And I long for all of us to make good - to be successful in your work and earn good money, but unless we do what's right with our money, and love kindness and walk humbly with our God what's it all worth? But I believe that "Deep in every healthy person's heart simmers a longing to be a good person." I believe that deep in our hearts simmers a longing to be a good church. Deep within our hearts is a longing, a hunger and thirst to do what's right, to act with kindness, to walk humbly with God.

Let us pray: O God, you have brought your people out of Egypt and redeemed them from bondage. You sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to make known your will. In Jesus Christ you portrayed the extent of your love, as he gave his life a ransom for many. He has shown us, O God, how to do justly, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.