

Sermon Text for June 23, 2024

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Psalm 23, Matthew 12:9-14 **“We are called to do God’s work”**

This church has always made it a priority to put our adults and our children in a position where they are able to do God’s work not only locally through the various organizations that we support financially and with our time, but also nationally as we send both youth and adult mission trips to reach out in care and concern. We do the same internationally where we are called to do God’s work. There is a very clear line and there is absolutely no questions that mission trips can be classified as God’s work. If you are going on a mission trip then you are doing God’s work. If you are supporting a mission trip then you are supporting God’s work. There is no doubt about that.

These youth and adults are going to a region of the world that I have classified as the poorest portion of this land that I have ever seen. I have been to all 50 states, I have been involved in national mission trips since I can remember. In 1979 my dad drove the family down to Americus, Georgia where we worked side by side with a guy named Millar Fuller who happened to be the person who started Habitat for Humanity. Where this group is going, is poor. We sent two trips down last year, a youth trip and an adult trip. There is no question that what you are going to do is good work.

Over these past few months this church has been recognized for the good that it has done. Let’s read some of the accolades that we have received in just the past few months.

READ OFF THE PLAQUES Again, this is a very clear and direct line between the work that we do as a church and the good work that God requires of us to do. My guess is that just about all of you have at one time or another been involved in good work in this church. Water street, mission trips, VBS, food bank, CIC, Easter Egg Hunt, Day of Action. These are all things that we do that is God’s work, no doubt.

While our primary purpose as a church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, to bring followers along to the kingdom of God, we know that disciples pursue righteousness, they pursue acting according to the will of God, doing good. But what happens when doing good rubs up against culture and society and is even potentially unlawful? There is a phrase called good trouble and it lifted up the civil rights era which was led by the church, which were acts of righteousness by God’s people. But it was trouble because much of what was done was not endorsed by the law, in fact it was illegal. But it was still acting according to the will of God.

Growing up I remember vividly the times that my father would tell us four boys that he may not be home for a while because he was doing that which was good, but was not legal. He spent 10 days in the jungles of El Salvador with the FMLN military guerillas, he worked tirelessly with the church sanctuary movement to house refugees within churches which was also illegal. I grew up knowing that doing God's work, acting out of righteousness can at times go against the cultural, societal, religious, and even legal norms of the day. I even learned that more often than not they should go against all of these things, otherwise they are not God's work.

Jesus finds himself in a similar situation where the good work that he does is illegal, but his call is for mercy and love and not sacrifices and law. Let's read.

READ

What you see before you are what are called paths of righteousness in the hillsides of Israel. All of the hillsides surrounding Jerusalem and even well beyond that are marked by these winding twisty lines on the landscape which reflects the centuries of paths that the shepherd and his sheep have taken. They call them paths of righteousness because just like Psalm 23 reflects they all lead eventually to the same place, home. You just have to stay on the path and it will take you where you want to go. Psalm 23 states that in the end these paths of righteousness lead to the house of the Lord where we will dwell forever.

This concept of following the path that God has laid before us is a simple one and it is one that inevitably will lead us to the house of the Lord. Just stay on the path, as windy and convoluted as it may seem, it will lead you home. Now that's a word someone here today needs to hear.

I spent last weekend with my mom and my brothers in Penney Farms retirement community. This community was founded by JC Penney for people who have devoted their life to church work, so there are hundreds of pastors and missionaries living all in this one community. My family has been present at Penney Farms for the past 50 years, in 1974 my grandmother, my mother's mother moved into this community. My mom and her sister live there and it is a reflection of people who have done God's work for generations and continue to do God's work even while they are in retirement. As an aside, my brother and I played against my mom and her sister, my Aunt Betty, in shuffleboard. They destroyed us, and they have a combined age of 180. My aunt is 91 and my mom is 89, it was humiliating even though we lost to people who had done God's work their whole life, they were not very nice to us. They smooched us and they let us know about it. Have you ever heard a 91 year old trash talk with her 89 year old sister? No? I have.

Let's get to Matthew now, Jesus ventures into hostile territory. He wanders into, Scripture says, "their" synagogue, which was the synagogue of those who were skeptical of his work and basically could be considered his enemies. He doesn't initiate the conversation, but they do with a question in vs.10: Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath? It is a denominational question, and it was a very hot button topic. Different rabbis said different things like we read in early writings called Yoma 8:6 "a case of risk of loss of life supersedes the Sabbath and the law." So basically if the person's life is at risk you can heal. But it was a matter of interpretation and different denominations back then viewed it differently. They knew Jesus acted out of mercy habitually, so they knew how he would answer and they were looking to trap him.

Jesus gives the answer in vs.12 by giving another denominational hot button issue. If an animal falls in a pit can you rescue it. There was conflicting thoughts about that back then. Some said yes, you can rescue the animal, but other rabbis, or pastors, said no. Does this sound familiar. There was back then, just like there is no, disagreement on doctrine and church policy and interpretation of Scripture and we have wandered right in the middle of two very hot button issues which Jesus is being asked to answer and take a stance. But he doesn't answer it directly, but rather answers it generally where he states it is always righteous to do good. We are always called to do good no matter what the topic or the issue is.

We live in a time of non-denominationalism. We aren't going to fight someone over the way Presbyterians think as opposed to the way Mennonites think. But that wasn't always the case. In our Scripture it states that the Pharisees were looking to destroy him because of what he stood for. We have seen that in our religious history as well. The Roman Catholic Church set up the inquisitions to destroy the Protestants. Protestants during the Reformation looked for anabaptists even our Mennonite brothers and sisters to drown them because of their beliefs in baptism. This is all true, this has all happened.

The Pharisees here thought they were doing the work of God and for them it involved destroying another individual whom they considered a threat. Today we find ourselves in this church sandwiched between a denomination that sees God's work as at times welcoming sin just as culture welcomes sin. Yet we also live here in Lancaster County where often Christianity is viewed through the narrow lens of Christian nationalism and extreme legalism which is one of the worst threats to our faith that I have seen in my life here on this earth.

We understand our perspective as being zero sum and at times the only thing that matters to us is winning the argument and not doing God's work. But we must always leave room for the possibility that we may be wrong. People can disagree on what is God's work and what is

not. But ultimately the work of God is done best by a unified church and churches working together. Following the rules sometimes has to be given up in order to do God's work. Just like here the assumption is that Sabbath regulations can be overridden by the need to "do good." Law without love or mercy is violating God's will.

There may come a day when doing good will get us into trouble. We aren't called to seek it, but it may find us. If and when it happens we will always have before us the responsibility to follow these paths of righteousness that will be meandering at times but will lead us all home. The same is true in your own life. You are pulled by so many voices but you have to always ask the question: is it legalistic and without mercy, if so then it is not of God. Is it permissive of sin and without a rudder, then it is not of God.

I want to leave you with this final thought. The example that Jesus gives us about the single sheep. If you only had one sheep would you go after it on the Sabbath? Is that the work of God? If you had many sheep it would be easy to take a chance with one, allow the Sabbath to pass and maybe that one sheep, out of the many, would still be alive. But if that was your only one, the one who provided the milk, the wool, the lambs, then you would pursue that one and do everything in your power as a good shepherd to save it. Jesus us knows us individually. John 10:3 says that Jesus knows his sheep by name. Jesus knows your name, he died on the cross just for you, for you as an individual, we mean that much to him.

It is from here where we find our motivation to do God's work, from the simple redeeming fact that Jesus knows us by name, died for each one of us individually, and rose from the dead so that every single one of us could share in his resurrection. Thanks be to God, now go do God's work. Amen.