

In the passage from Romans we're reading today, it feels like Paul is calling the church of Rome and us to "shake off our shoes. Forgive and be forgiven. Take up our spade and break ground." Paul has been teaching the Jews and the Gentiles that they should love one another, not judge each other or make another stumble. Don't other one another. Here he is continuing to make a plea for harmony between the Jews and the Gentiles based on an appeal to follow Christ's example. Because at the end of the day the Good News is for both the Jews and Gentiles so welcome and teach goodness to one another. You know- get to tending your spiritual gardens! Today we're continuing with the sixth characteristic of the Fruit of the Spirit: "goodness" or "generosity." What does good mean? When we're little we're told, "Now be a good girl/boy!" Or we say, "You're a good person" or "That was a good game." But is that the same as what Paul means? If you'll nerd out with me for a moment. The Greek word Paul uses in Galatians 5:22 **ἀγαθωσύνη** (*agathosynē*) is often translated as **goodness**, but its meaning carries a rich depth beyond the general sense of being "good." It's more like going out of one's way to do good and act with integrity, righteousness, and kindness towards others. This word also includes benevolence towards others, which is why it sometimes gets translated as "generosity," like on my chalk piece here. "Paul often uses this word to mean acting in an honorable way that gives freely of the self (there's that connection to generosity)" (Gamble). Yet, this word is more than just ethical behavior; it reflects the goodness of God. That's what Paul is saying here- our ability to give of ourselves generously is tied both to our personal knowledge of Christ and our willingness to help one another learn. This

word for goodness or generosity contrasts with evil and wickedness, especially in Paul's usage. Where wickedness destroys, goodness builds up and promotes harmony. So, when we think of it, we should think of a **goodness in action**—something dynamic that seeks the well-being of others, flows from a moral and spiritual source, and aligns with God's own nature- being Christ-like. **PRAY. READ.**

For Paul there is always a relationship between grace and concrete action. While kindness mellows our character, goodness takes that character to the streets (Eugenia Anne Gamble, *Tending The Wild Garden*). John Wesley, the father of Methodism, is often credited as putting it this way, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." The point being that when we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us, we grow the characteristic of goodness in ourselves and in our community. While this kind of goodness is nonviolent, it can become confrontational. "Spirit goodness is goodness that makes things happen. It is faith on its feet, moving the world toward the fullness of the values of God. Goodness is faith on its feet doing things that set other things in motion" (Gamble). When I think of this, I'm reminded of meeting the late Congressman John Lewis when he spoke at the Montreat College Conference in 2009 and adopting his phrase of "getting into good trouble." Getting into good trouble involves courage and boldness along with faith in order to find ways to get in the way. In the Old Testament, there's a word (tov) that's translated as goodness, and while it means to be "pleasant,

beneficial, favorable, cheerful, and to do good, it sometimes can also refer to something being morally good. More often, though, the words ‘righteousness, ‘justice,’ or even ‘uprightness’ are more accurate meanings” (Gamble). For example, God displays God’s goodness when God parts the Red Sea, leading people to freedom and promised blessing. Or God displays God’s goodness in the entirety of creation “that is ordered so carefully and generously that God saw that it was good. Or God displays God’s goodness and perfection in the gift of the Law and in the means of grace that the sacrificial system allows a way to make up for sinful choices” (Gamble). But then in the New Testament, we find *agathosynē*, “which Paul uses more than any other New Testament writer. *Agathosynē* is a work of God, not of human nature. If you’ve ever done anything powerfully good and courageous and later felt stunned that you did it, then you know what it feels like for the Spirit to do goodness through you” (Gamble).

I was about nine months pregnant with our daughter, Bailey, and I had a craving for fresh pineapple. There was no time for a dish from the cabinet. I quickly grabbed a fork from the drawer and wolfed down the every last piece of pineapple straight from the store container. The screen door was open, and I could hear yelling in a neighbor’s yard. Only one man was yelling. I got up and looked out the window and saw a man, in his 40s or 50s, yelling at an elderly gentleman in his late 60s/early 70s. The younger man was being incredibly rude to the man screaming in his face about several spots he had missed weed eating the yard. I walked to another window and saw a trailer with yard equipment and surmised that they

were working on my neighbor's yard. I was so incensed that I rushed out the door, down the stairs, driveway, and sidewalk to two doors down. I marched up the front yard until I arrived at the fence to the backyard. One was operating the weedeater and the other a blower. I motioned to the younger guy with the blower in his hand. He stopped, turned it off and walked toward me. With my fork still in my hand, I told the man that what I witnessed him do was disrespectful and verbally abusive. I then told him that I would let the older couple who lived in that house know never to hire him again due to his unprofessionalism and unacceptable behavior. By this time, the elderly man with the weedeater had stopped weedeating and was eavesdropping. I ended my Tedtalk with how much this man should be ashamed of his behavior, especially as the owner of a lawn care business and that he needed not only to apologize to his presumed employee but to let his clients know what he did. I then dropped my hand which was holding my fork near his face and walked away. Whoa. I normally am one to mind my own business, but God's Spirit would not let me sit still after hearing what I heard and witnessing what I witnessed. God is good. All the time and all the time, God is good.

"Spirit goodness does not simply grieve oppression and exploitation. It does what it can, brings its energy to bear, to disrupt injustice whenever, wherever, and despite whatever. Jesus' goodness confounded norms and was met with controversy. We can expect the same in our day when the Spirit ripens goodness in our lives. Sometimes struggle is fertilizer for maturity. Goodness does not sit down and say please and thank you to the

oppressor for the crumbs that fall from the table. Goodness includes resistance to power that erases the voices of those who bother or frighten those in power” (Gamble). A pastor tells of sitting across from Desmond Tutu at a luncheon some years ago. At one point during the meal, he looked intently at her and said, “Pastor, tell me of your struggle.” He stumped her. She was so caught off guard that she can’t recall what she said. Whatever she said, he responded with, “There is braveness in you. You will need it” (Gamble). Yes, courage is absolutely essential to goodness. “If we heed Jesus’ call to feed his sheep, we will often be led by others to hard places and find that we have little choice in the matter. Goodness, faith on its feet, will take us where the love of God for the world needs us to go. The clearest example of goodness taking the difficult but needed path is, of course, the crucifixion of Jesus” (Gamble).

These past several years in our justice ministry here at Triune and in our membership in GOAL, my people pleasing has had to take a backseat due to Spirit goodness ripening. Holding others, especially elected officials, many of whom are friends, accountable isn’t easy, and it sure isn’t the best way to make friends. But Jesus models that working for goodness...working for justice is a process. “It is utterly respectful. It is both personal and communal. It sometimes produces desired results, and sometimes does not. Its motivation is always to bring the other to goodness, to encourage goodness in the other. It is not to punish but rather to restore. Compassion for the struggles and grief of people moves Jesus [and hopefully us] to generous goodness, to putting it all on the line. Paul in his letter to the

church in Rome- both the Jews and the Gentiles- talks about goodness as a prerequisite for teaching as well as for being a disciple of Jesus. “What is clear is that goodness is a way of talking about how God acts for, with, and through believers” (Gamble). That’s right. Any goodness we do is God doing it through us.

What are some of the weeds that can choke out the shoot of goodness in your garden? Things such as hate, hypocrisy, delusions, cowardice, and flat out lies, can strangle goodness. We have observed this throughout history. “It takes courage and generosity of spirit to stand against the lies that strangle out true goodness. Mature goodness requires that we be the change we want to see and not the lies” (Gamble). Therefore, we need to take up our spade and break ground within ourselves and our community, understanding that true Spirit goodness is always recognized by humility. Those seeking the goodness of God don’t want to be right; they want to be of use to God and their neighbors. “At the heart, goodness is about how we choose to use our power. We all have some power, even when we don’t know how to harness it. Sometimes the goodness will take us to the streets in protest against injustice. Sometimes it will take us to city or county council meetings or to the Statehouse to advocate for the common good in policies and procedures. Sometimes it will take us into the age-old confrontation of hate and prejudice. Sometimes it will take us into the murky realm of politics. Sometimes it will take us into the heart of the church itself. Sometimes it will lead us into courageous action that can change the world. Sometimes it will be released in small and nuanced

bursts of committed daily actions. Because at the end of the day, goodness is not always about doing the big things; it's about using our power actively for the good of others" (Gamble). We must ask God throughout the day to enable each of us to be full of goodness and that includes treating ourselves with goodness by 1. Stopping patterns that are doing us harm. 2. Bringing down expectations that are killing us or policies that are limiting our full expression. 3. Learning to stand up for ourselves in harmful situations, whether toxic relationships, structures, or habits. Remembering that "because goodness requires loving motives; it corrects but never humiliates" (Gamble). For as Paul says, "My brothers and sisters, I myself am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and are able to teach each other" (Rom. 15:14). Thanks be to God for God is so good; God is good to us! Amen.