

***“Whatever is pleasing...”***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship on the Seventh Sunday of Epiphany  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 19, 2017

Text: Ephesians 5:6-10

*“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”*

“Whatever is pleasing.” Now there is an open-ended phrase if ever there was one, and yet this is one of Paul’s specifically named attributes that followers of Jesus should invest time thinking about. Remember that in Philippians 4:8, the text we are examining in detail in these weeks leading up to Lent, Paul doesn’t say to just do it. Don’t just jump right in to try to be honorable or pure or pleasing, he advises. Instead, Paul’s instructions are to think about what it means to live out what each of these attributes requires. This implies, I think, an admonition to consider deeply what it is each of these attributes we are to strive for really mean within the framework of living a Christian life. So today, we will spend some time together pondering what it might mean for our life as followers of Jesus to embody whatever is pleasing.

Right away, the pitfalls of this approach become visible as we ask ourselves a key question about this whole idea of pursuing, “whatever is pleasing.” Pleasing to whom? That is clearly an existential question! If you are going to invest time in considering

whatever is pleasing, don't you have to know who it is you are trying to please? Is it yourself? Many self-help gurus would argue, yes it is absolutely yourself. You have to like yourself first, before you can really like or love someone else, they say. You have to make yourself happy, before you will even know how to make someone else happy. You have to know what it means to please yourself before you can begin to understand what it means to be pleasing to other people. In other words, you come first when it comes to whatever is pleasing. But is this really what Paul had in mind for followers of Jesus? Maybe not...

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?” Such are the familiar words of the evil queen in one of the most famous of all fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, the story of Snow White. In this story the evil queen, who is Snow White's step-mother, becomes obsessed with being the most beautiful woman in the land. Every day she asks the magic mirror who is the most beautiful and every day the answer is the same – she is. Until, one day the mirror answers that though the queen is indeed beautiful, Snow White is now the most beautiful. In fact, the mirror says that Snow White is a thousand times more beautiful than the queen. Needless to say, this does not go over well and the story unfolds with the queen ordering the huntsman to kill Snow White after taking her into the forest. Instead the huntsman tells Snow White to run away which she does until she finds a home with

seven short guys we know as the seven dwarfs. The queen, thinking the deed has been done, goes to her magic mirror once again and asks, “mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” Expecting to hear she is once more, instead the mirror insists Snow White is still a thousand more times beautiful even though she’s now living with the seven dwarfs deep in the forest.

The queen is definitely not pleased with this response. And so the fairy tale story unfolds with the queen disguised as an old crone convincing Snow White to eat a poisoned apple from which she appears to die. The heart-broken seven dwarfs place her in a glass coffin where she is soon seen by a handsome prince who falls in love with her on sight. He convinces the dwarfs to let him kiss her and she is revived when the bit of poison apple falls from her mouth. The Prince carries her off and marries her just in time for the evil queen to ask once again, “mirror, mirror on the wall who is the fairest of them all?” When she hears the mirror’s answer – “you, lady, are loveliest here, but lovelier still is the newly made queen, Snow White” – the evil queen becomes so enraged that she falls over dead. Thus do the Brothers Grimm remind us in no uncertain terms that pleasing yourself above all else is not the best decision. And Paul would agree! All pleasing yourself accomplishes is to make you selfish and even heartless towards others. You do have to like yourself, yes. But you can never put yourself and your desires above everyone and everything else.

That will lead only to ever increasing distance from God and ultimately, your own destruction.

So, if pleasing ourselves is not an advisable starting point, how about pleasing others? Is that where our emphasis should be? Is that where we will find what Paul is recommending as a vital part of living life as a follower of Christ? Well, focusing on something other than one's own self-interests would seem a better starting point since Jesus talks a lot about loving the other as a way to show our love for God. Indeed Jesus himself spent much of his time healing others, teaching others, even feeding others when the situation presented itself as it did at the feeding of the 5000. He did this not to please himself, certainly. But did he do it to please others? Were they happy with the results of what he did as they were healed and gained deeper understanding of God's love for them and its life-transforming possibilities? Yes, of course. But is that why Jesus did what he did? Just to make them happy? Or was something else going on?

Oskar Schindler was an ethnic German who found himself in a unique position to save the lives of thousands of Jews in Poland during World War II. Initially, he hired the Jews to work in his factories because they were the cheapest labor source, thus maximizing his profits. Then he witnessed the Nazis "liquidating" the Jews in the Warsaw ghettos and he was profoundly affected. From that moment on, he did whatever he could to save as many

Jews as possible by hiring them as workers in his factory. He paid exorbitant bribes to the Nazis to allow the Jews to stay in a camp he built for them near the factory. Later, when the Germans were losing the war, he intervened once again, paying even more bribes first to save his Jewish laborers, now his friends, from execution by the SS and then to divert them from their assigned fate in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Eventually, Schindler had to leave to escape himself to avoid being captured and executed by the Russians. As he said good-bye to his Jewish friends, they presented him with a letter confirming his work to help them along with a ring engraved with a Talmudic inscription: “Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.”

Schindler, who spent the rest of his life feeling like he did not do enough to save more Jews, did not risk his own life to please the Jews whose lives he saved. They were profoundly grateful to be sure and helping them gave Schindler a sense of deep satisfaction, at least on some level. But this was not why he did it. This was not why he risked his life every day on their behalf. He did what he did because it was the right thing to do. On the day he witnessed firsthand the murder of hundreds of innocent women and children and old people in the ghettos of Warsaw at the hands of the Germans, he knew he faced evil incarnate and he decided to do whatever he could to combat that evil. In the words of this morning’s text from Ephesians, Schindler recognized the

Nazis as the darkness and he decided to be the light the situation required if innocent people were to survive. Was he pondering what would be pleasing to God as he decided to act? No one knows for sure, except for him. But that does not change the reality that God acted through him to bring light into the midst of horrific darkness, saving lives that otherwise would have been lost to the Nazi madness.

So, if pursuing whatever is pleasing to ourselves or to others is not what Paul had in mind, then the only option left is what is pleasing to God. Of course! Of course Paul would urge us to strive to understand and live into reality through our lives each day whatever is pleasing to God. This is what the writer of Ephesians is explaining as he describes the importance of finding out what is pleasing to the Lord. “Live as children of the light,” he says, “for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.” The fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. There is the key to our understanding of this, I think, in ways that make sense, that make it possible to grasp what Paul wants us to do as followers of Christ. It’s actually pretty simple and it goes back to what we learned as children. Don’t do anything when no one is around to see that you would be ashamed of if it came to light. In other words, if something is wrong, it’s wrong, whether someone sees you do it or hears you say it, or not. Wrong is wrong just like darkness is darkness. Sure, there might be some

advantage to you, something pleasing for you, if you just look the other way in a particular circumstance. But wrong is wrong, Paul says. Light is light and dark is dark and don't confuse the two.

This is our advantage as followers of Jesus. We know the light we are to follow and to live within. We know the light because Jesus has revealed it to us. We know that whatever is pleasing is only pleasing if Jesus would be pleased by it in the bright light of day. We are not to be confused by "empty words" that will whisper in our ears that it's okay to cheat on a test or on our taxes just this once because who's going to know? We're not to be mean to someone who's been mean to us because that might make us feel better but it's not what Jesus wants or expects. We're not to think it's okay to blame others for our problems or find excuses not to help people who need our help because it feels like we are justified in doing so for some reason. That blurs the line of light and darkness, of pleasing ourselves with pleasing God and it will never lead us where Jesus wants us to go.

Whatever is pleasing, Paul says, is something we are to think about, wonder about, reflect on as we live our lives each day. And no wonder because it is just too simple to slip into pleasing ourselves, doing what's easy for us, convenient for us, instead of what God needs us to do. Jesus told a story about exactly this reality we face all the time. It was the story of the Good Samaritan. You know it! A man was traveling and was set upon

by robbers who beat him and left him for dead on the side of road. Two men who should have been the first to offer assistance – a priest and a Levite (a very religious man) – walked right by, even crossing to the other side of the road. Then a Samaritan, a man from the “wrong sort of people,” stopped and helped the man. He took him to an inn and paid for his care, promising to come back to pay any additional cost. In this story, the priest and the Levite didn’t stop to help because they were mired in the darkness of doing only what mattered to them. The Samaritan, however, knew darkness when he saw it and decided the only thing to do, the only pleasing thing to God, was to bring light into the darkness by helping the injured man. So he did.

Whatever is pleasing. It’s a question which confronts us all the time, and yet one we seldom stop to consider how we will answer in any detail. Do we put pleasing ourselves first? Is pleasing others what guides our decisions each day? Or do we stop to consider what would be most pleasing to God as we decide how to respond to all those situations we face each day? These are the questions Paul is inviting us to take the time to recognize and consider carefully before we act. Admittedly this is not easy to do. In fact one could argue the effort needed to maintain our awareness of what would be pleasing to God is not itself a pleasing prospect. Maybe not. But, then again, isn’t that exactly Paul’s point? Amen.