

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

September 6, 2009

James 2: 1-10; 14-17; Mark 7: 24-37

“Good Work!”

Consider these scenarios with me for a bit:

You're in school; you get your spelling or math test back from the teacher; you see the letter A and a smiley face sticker, and these words written in red ink by the teacher, “Good Work!”

It's time for your annual evaluation with your supervisor. You're hoping for a raise or promotion from the boss. On the form the supervisor has written his recommendation with these words underlined, “Good work!”

You've given a presentation or made some kind of speech, and when you're done, several people pat you on your shoulder, saying, “Good work!”

It's an expression used in a variety of situations, isn't it? Good work! Good job! And always with an exclamation mark! It's an expression that marks some kind of achievement or accomplishment. It's an expression that carries with it some kind of evaluative judgment. A “D” on that spelling test would not have received the smiley face sticker or the “good work!” comment. When you get fired because of unsatisfactory performance, you do not get a “good work!” reference letter. “Good work!” means work done well. It means work that meets a certain measured criteria of success. It means what it means – good work! Way to go! Nice job! You nailed it! Thatta boy, thatta girl! You showed 'em! Can't do it any better than that! Way to go! Good work!

Now hear again these verses from our scripture readings for today:

From the Letter of James: “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

And from the Gospel of Mark: “They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well, he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

What does it mean to say Jesus has done everything well?” Does it mean he got an A on his ministry report card? Does it mean that he healed everybody all the time? Does it mean that he was a big shot success at his job?

Well, of course it doesn't mean those things, right? For how did things really go in his career? Conflict, controversy, and finally, crucifixion. Not exactly the kind of job performance that leads to a “good work!” evaluation, is it? Not if the work is being evaluated according to quantifiable standards. Not if doing everything well means that everything done produces successful results. That everybody Jesus spoke to became a disciple. That every sick person who ever saw or came near Jesus was healed. That everyone Jesus encountered had a life-transforming

experience. If that is what “doing everything well” means, then Jesus didn’t do everything well, at all.

And if that’s what “good work” means to us as individual Christians or to us as a church, then we don’t get the pat on the back or the smiley face sticker, either. And that can make us uncomfortable, can’t it? That can make us feel inadequate or inferior.

We’ve entered another Charge Conference season as United Methodists. Ours is going to be November 3. I’ll have to turn in a lot of forms. How many people joined our church this past year? How many died or withdrew or transferred their membership? How much money do we have in our bank account? What percentage of our conference and district apportionments have we paid so far this year? Then at the end of the year, I’ll have even more forms to turn in, and more information to provide: How many people were baptized this year? How many children, youth, and adults are in Sunday School classes? How much money did we give to UMCOR, to Nothing but Nets, to World Communion and Peace with Justice Sundays? How much money did we contribute to local missions? What was our average worship attendance in the previous year, and what is it this year?

And so on. After turning in our 2008 annual report we didn’t get any “good work!” letter from our Bishop or District Superintendent. What I did get as your pastor was a letter informing me that our church’s name had been turned into the Conference Treasurer and that we were to be in consultation with her about our financial situation and to develop a plan for improving it. No smiley face sticker. No pat on the back. No “Good work, Church of the Redeemer!” congratulations report card.

But, listen, “doing everything well” can have a different meaning, can’t it? And so can the expression, “good work.” I think what the crowd means in their evaluation of Jesus is that he lived out his calling and purpose. He never lost sight of who he was and how he was to live. He didn’t forget those who weren’t part of the mainstream. He forgave sinners. He reached out to a Syro-Phoenician woman and he healed a deaf-mute Gentile. He blessed little children. He ate with tax collectors. He practiced what he believed.

And that’s what I think “doing things well” means for us as a church, too. I think that’s what doing good work means. Not that all our work leads to “good” results, but that our work itself is good, and that our work is doing good in the lives of other people and in the world. That it’s about helping, not hurting. It’s about feeding, not fighting. It’s about welcoming and loving. It’s about being responsible, not about being rich. It about being known for what we do, and not for what we have.

There’s no place on all those evaluation forms to report this kind of good work, however. But that’s okay. Because it’s really what matters most.

Let me share some examples now:

A woman came to our church door late one afternoon this past week. I sort of recognized her. She said she and her daughter had come here one Easter Sunday. She needed help. I invited her in, and listened, and then made a number of phone calls. I had her follow me to the gas station so I could put gas in her car, gave her some money, and sent her on her way to a women’s shelter for safe keeping. She said she didn’t know where else to go, so she came to our church for help.

A week ago I performed a wedding renewal ceremony for a couple from Pennsylvania. They had their first date at Randall Park Mall back when they were college students. They had wanted to renew their vows at the mall but learned the mall was closed. They kept calling the church that has a ministry at the mall but no one would ever return their calls. So finally they went on line and googled churches near the mall. They said ours was the first church that came up. They went to our web-site, and really liked what they saw and read about us, and contacted me. I agreed to do the service. When I met them they told me that one of their friends who would be at the renewal ceremony is gay, and that they liked knowing that our church doesn't exclude gay people. They also said that when they kept trying to contact that other church, they learned that the church mentions on its web-site that it takes a strong stand against homosexuality. So they ended up being glad that church had never called them back. Now this was a husband and wife couple, and the issue of gay rights or gays in the church was not something that would be coming up in the wedding renewal service at all, but it still mattered to them that a pastor of a welcoming church perform the ceremony. And later that same day, that couple and all their friends came to our Rib Feast, bought and ate dinners, and after they left, one of them returned and made an extra donation to our church just to say thanks for being the church we are.

Now where can I put stuff like that on our Charge Conference or Annual Report forms? I can't. But isn't that what it means to do good work? And isn't that the kind of work we want to keep doing? Work that empowers others? Work that restores and renews? Work that includes those who others leave out?

The Old Testament lesson for today, which we didn't read earlier, is from Proverbs 22 and begins with this line: "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold."

We aren't a church with great riches. We don't have a storehouse of silver or gold. But, you know, we do have a good name. And it's our good name that matters most. Do you want to be known as the church where the well-heeled go or as the church you can go to when you don't know where else to turn? Do you want to be known as a church that welcomes or as a church with a big endowment?

And while being known for both wouldn't of course be so bad, we can, until that time comes, still hold our heads up high. For who we are matters. What we do matters. The money, for example, you put into today's communion offering for my pastor's discretionary fund, helps people like that woman who came to our door last week because she remembered how friendly we were on Easter Sunday, or that man who called one day and said he had seen our church's advertisement in the Chronicle, and thought that maybe we wouldn't turn him away because he is HIV positive and that maybe we would be willing to help him with one of his utility bills. I said we were. And I did.

"You do well," James exhorts in his letter, "if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

This is the law Jesus followed so perfectly in his life and ministry, and this is why he was known as one who has done everything well.

Our church's name may not be on the list of churches who have taken in the most members or who have paid all their apportionments or who have increased their worship attendance by more than 10%. But our good name is known by those who need help in our community. Our good name is known by those who are ostracized or oppressed by others.

In his own Labor Day Sunday sermon in 2003, Rev. John Buchanon, editor of *The Christian Century* and pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, reflects on this James text, and what is often referred to as "behavioral religion." He writes, "What sometimes gets lost is James' simple reminder that you really don't believe something until it shapes and forms what you do and how you live." He then quotes from one of Fred Craddock's *Cherry Log* sermons:

"Two things are absolutely essential to the church: Jesus Christ and human need. In that place where the church dwells are the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots, the powerful and the powerless. There are those who are educated and those who are ignorant. There are those who believe and those who don't believe. There are the high and the mighty and the lowly whom nobody knows. In between is the Church of Jesus Christ. The church is called to help both the haves and the have nots, the powerful and the powerless. The church is to be the gospel for all these people. As long as you have Christ and as long as you have needs, you have the church" (John Buchanan, "Faith is Something You Do", www.goodpreacher.com).

And then in 2006 he reflects on this same James text again, offering this insight:

"Be doers of the word, and not hearers only," was addressed to a congregation, after all. It is probably the briefest and best mission statement for the church of Jesus Christ, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, and every church that claims the name Christian: "Be doers of the word." Our job, our mission, our reason for being here is simply to "do the word," to give corporate, missional expression to what we most deeply believe. And so we measure ourselves, not on the basis of how many members we have or the size of our budget. We evaluate and measure a church on the basis of what it does in the world, the lives it touches, the sick visited, the hungry fed, the fallen lifted up, the grieving encouraged, the children nurtured and taught and loved, the excluded included." (John Buchanan, "Doing What You Need To Do", www.goodpreacher.com)

So listen again – and take heart:

"A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches."

"You do well if you really fulfill the law according to the scripture, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"They were astounded beyond measure, saying 'He has done everything well.'"

On this Labor Day Sunday we acknowledge the goodness of God's work in our lives and in the world. We taste and see that goodness in our celebration of Holy Communion. And we align ourselves with God's goodness by our own work as individuals and as a church. Good work is work that does good. Work that makes things better for others. Work that uplifts, restores, encourages, feeds, heals, comforts, builds, frees, forgives and loves. So, good work, friends! Good work, Church of the Redeemer!