

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Titus: What Goodness Can Do”

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Titus 3:1-11

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We are in the book of Titus, this week, continuing our series, *From Cretans to Christians*. At first, when Pastor Ben was developing this series, I was a little taken aback when he gave us the name for the series. I thought, “Wow! That sounds a little harsh.” But I think our passage this week reflects that title very well. You’ll remember from the last few weeks, the author of Titus, (possibly Paul), is instructing Paul’s assistant, Titus, to remind the people of Crete, who were new Christians, to have an “unashamed commitment to the gospel.” That begs the question, what does that look like? They had been known to be, as one actual Cretan was quoted, “Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.” (Titus 1:12) But now as Christians, Paul was instructing them to remember they needed to act out the powerful love and grace they had been shown. That’s where we are this week, as we look at Titus 3:1-11. As we read it, listen to how it goes from a people’s past of foolishness, and hate, to possibilities of love that flows, to pure gold. Let us hear God’s word.

3 Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, ² to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. ³ For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. ⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ God saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to God’s mercy, through the water^[a] of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. ⁶ This Spirit God poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. ⁸ The saying is sure.

I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone. ⁹ But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. ¹⁰ After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions, ¹¹ since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray. Lord, we turn to you, to learn more about ourselves. We thank you, powerful Savior, that you have shown us such love and mercy. Help us, God to always turn to you. And now, open our hearts, and our ears to what you would have us hear. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Was there a certain phrase that your mother or father or your caregiver as a child, used as you were leaving? What was it? My grandfather always said, “Take care.” One of my friends always said “Make good choices.” I often told my children, “Remember who you are.” As my children got older, I often got an eye roll from them when I said it. It wasn’t until they were grown they told me that that had put a lot of pressure on them as preacher’s kids. If you were a preacher’s kid, you might understand. They took it to mean that they needed to

act nice because they were preacher’s kids. But I hadn’t meant it to mean that. I had always taught my daughters that they were God’s beloved children, and I wanted them to remember and feel that love even if the world around them didn’t cause them to feel loved.

It seems to me that the author writing to Titus, is instructing the Cretans, to remember who they are – they are no longer Cretans, they are now Christians. They have been transformed. But transformation is a process. And in a transformation process it is easy to go back to ways that are familiar, but not always healthy. It sounds to me like Paul, is helping them realize being a Christian is a process. Pretty pastoral, don’t you think? But he wants Titus to remind them how to act, but not just how to act, but “why” they are to act as Christians, and how they can act as Christians, even when it is so difficult at times. He reminds them how they acted before – “foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.” (3:3) Truly sounds like Cretans. But a transformation process began, even before they knew they needed to be transformed. What happened?

Goodness, loving kindness, and mercy happened. “Goodness and loving kindness (*philanthrópia*) were attributes commonly ascribed to the ideal Hellenistic ruler. (But) God, the ruler of heaven and earth, displays these attributes far beyond the capacity of any human ruler, taking the initiative to save us, ‘not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to God’s mercy’ (3:5).” It was dependent on God.

God our Savior appeared! Passages in Titus are often used on Christmas Eve as we celebrate God’s love and mercy made manifest in Jesus. No wonder Scripture talks about the powerful songs of the angels, and a star that glowed so bright! It was a powerful thing that was happening! Grace and mercy happened – even before people knew anything about it. I love the way the Book of Order phrases baptism of children, “The baptism of our young children witnesses to the truth that God claims people in love even before they are able to respond in faith.”^[1] Just a few minutes ago, Riley was baptized. She has been claimed in love, even before she can respond in faith, by an extremely loving God! Pretty powerful isn’t it?

Paul lays out God’s nature – and they are golden ways. “Stunning is the characterization of the primary attributes of God revealed in Christ — “goodness” (*chrestotes*; “kindness” in NIV and NET), “loving kindness” (*philanthropia*; lit. “love of humanity”), and “mercy” (*eleos*). In short, God — in God’s innermost heart — is a God of tenderhearted mercy who deeply loves and cares about humanity. . . one that has been enfleshed, manifested in Jesus.”^[2] And through baptism we become one with Jesus – we become one with that kind of love. And that is what gives us the ability to go from Cretans to Christians. And, that, I think is what I wanted my daughters to remember – that my hope for them was that they would know that they, as Christians are one with goodness, loving kindness, and mercy. I wanted them to remember that. Is that who you know God to be? I hope so. If so, when was the first time you realized that that is who God is? Did it help you in your Christian walk? Does it help you to be continually transformed? That is who God wants us to be – not because it will get us to heaven to try and act transformed. We simply can count on God to continue to bathe us in that love and mercy – transforming us – and then, reflecting God’s love and mercy to others.

But it’s easy to forget who we are. Especially when there is so much noise around us with arguments and division and hate-filled actions and speech. Sometimes we need leaders to remind us. And many do it, not necessarily with just words, but through actions. I see it around me often, here, at the church. I see leaders,

bagging up or delivering groceries for Fish Food Pantry, people going on mission trips, people working with young people, mentoring them in confirmation classes, or working with children at Vacation Bible School, people transporting people to church or doctor's appointments, people listening to heartaches as Stephen Ministers or facilitating Grief Care – not because they are supposed to do these things. Rather it is the Spirit that reminds them they are still being bathed in that goodness, loving kindness, and mercy. They are continuing to listen to the Spirit and continuing to be transformed. And there are leaders who have taught about that kind of loving Savior who transforms, one such as the beautiful soul that we remembered and celebrated yesterday. I believe Dr. Barron taught and reminded us to count on a God who is full of goodness, loving kindness, and tremendous mercy. His son Walt's remembrances helped us see that yesterday in his remarks. Dr. Barron reminded us throughout his life who God is and who we are, and Dr. Barron reflected God's love and mercy.

I know someone who leaves people with a phrase often when he encounters people. It may be someone who helps him at a store, or the doctor's office or a restaurant. When they have simply shown him simple grace or kindness, he will say something like – "I just want you to know that you have shown me the Risen Christ today." They are often taken aback and ask, "How have I done that?" And then he shares with them briefly how they have shown him grace and loving kindness. It tells them about this loving God and how they reflect God's golden qualities to others, even if they don't realize that is what they are doing. How are others showing us the face of the Risen Christ? How are we showing others the face of the Risen Christ on a daily basis?

In the name of our Loving Creator, Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.