

“The Holy Habit of Goodness”

1 John 3:1-3

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. Beloved, we are God’s children now.”

I have a question for you. What, Oh faithful people, is genuine goodness, and what is the source of it?

As most of you know, I’m 50 years old now. Lately, I find myself thinking about goodness because I wish I were better. I don’t know that it’s my age as much as it is my personality. It surely is my sin when I catch myself being unkind or abrupt or short-tempered. I would like to be good all the time. I think this is, probably, the desire of all of us – that we would like to be good.

When I look around, I see that there are people near me who have this sweet ability to be good. The goodness shines in them without effort. It is not a striving on their part, and it doesn’t seek some kind of a reward, and so the question rises: How can I be like them? Where does this goodness come from and what is it?

There are many of you here in Divinity who for me have been examples of goodness; sweet, absolutely genuine, nothing striving inside of you. Just good people. God has blessed me to serve congregations with many good people. So as not to embarrass any of you, I want to share a little bit about a Nebraska woman who embodied and lived the Holy Habit of Goodness.

In the midst of summer evening darkness during the annual Relay for Life,

Marilus stood on a platform in front of the crowd, holding the microphone. A light was flashed on her Relay for Life T-shirt. Full of life and energy and the light of Christ, with a huge smile, she began to speak . . .

“As you look at me tonight, imagine a 9 year-old little farm girl with blonde, naturally curly hair. I’d finished my chores and had come into the house when my mom asked me if I had closed the door to the chicken house. I knew I had to go back out and close the door. It was dark and I imagined all kinds of evil in the darkness. I closed the chicken house door and began to walk faster and faster toward the house where the light was shining out in the darkness of night. If only I can get to the light, I’ll be safe there. Cancer is the darkness that surrounds me. If only I can get to the light. I’ll be safe there.”

Marilus in her sweet goodness then talked about faith. F.A.I.T.H.

F - is for forgiveness. Learning to forgive ourselves and others. When Marilus and her mother came to a 6 week Bible Study on grieving, she would give her mother credit for teaching her about faith, forgiveness, and grieving. Even though her mom had lost 3 children and her husband, her faith remained strong, her ability to forgive others a constant, and an example for Marilus. When Marilus was 13 and her older sister died, she talked about how her faith got her through her grief then and again when her own son died in a farming accident – asphyxiated in a silo. A faith that was passed on to her by her parents, a faith that was nurtured when she would spend time alone by the farm pond or at the church cemetery. A

faith that had been passed down to her children and friends.

A - is for attitude and appearance. Your attitude is inside you and should be positive. Marilus always had a positive attitude and a smile on her face that would pick others up – including me. People would upset her and she would still find something positive to say about them. As a wife, a mother, a sister, a friend, a Stephen Minister, a church council member, or working with handicapped adults at the Martin Luther Home – it was never about her. It was about “letting your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.” Not even cancer could change her attitude and smile, especially at the end.

I - is for Intuition and Information. Marilus would say, “if you’re not feeling right, check it out. Trust your intuition. Learn all you can.”

T - is for Trust and Thankfulness. First, trust and be thankful to God. Marilus liked to quote and to live Jesus’ words – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Trust and be thankful to God, to church, to family, and to friends.

H - is for Hope and the light of heaven. Marilus never gave up hope. After her first cancer treatment, she went out and bought a pair of Birkenstocks and hoped to wear them out. Ultimately, she had the hope of going home, to the light

of her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. She once told me that one thing she was really looking forward to in heaven was her son, Robby, coming up behind her as he used to do in the milk-house, and surprising her with a big bear hug as he lifts her off the ground.

Marilus had F.A.I.T.H. She remains for me an example of goodness. It is this goodness that I seek. It is a habit of goodness we all seek as God's children.

Not sporadic, isolated acts of goodness, however great they may be. They occur on the whim of an individual and whim is unreliable. when the whim dies, the goodness dies.

It is a habit of goodness we seek as God's children. Not goodness performed because someone is watching, someone who could criticize or reward; a boss, a parent, a spouse, a friend, God.

That sort of goodness is not good, really. Its first consideration is always the self. The self seeks praise. The self avoids guilt and pain and punishment. There can be no true joy in "goodness" which is meant to protect oneself or to curry favor, since its deepest motives must be fear of the stick or a selfish desire for the carrot. I'll be good to avoid punishment or to get a reward.

No. What we hope and pray for both in community and within ourselves – is a habit of goodness. This goodness is motiveless. It is a way of life. It's the person's personality – spontaneous goodness that's characteristic in spirit.

There is no heroism in this goodness because there's no awareness of

exceptional action. Goodness is natural. What other thing should one do besides this good thing? Why, there is no other thing! That's how Marilus was. That's how we want to be. You see, this goodness springs from a quality of being.

And what quality is that? As I grow older and wiser, I believe goodness springs from being at peace. It is that peace which occurs within the love and protection of Almighty God. There is nothing the peaceful person needs to prove. It has all been proved. So any act of goodness has no ulterior motive, no hypocrisy. It is exactly what it seems to be – an act of goodness, pure and simple. When we get to that point in life where we have nothing to promote or to prove, then we can be sincerely and selflessly kind.

This habit of goodness arises from the awareness that we are loved. When I am much loved, then I am very good. When you are much loved, then you are very good. But the love that makes us good must be genuine, constant, and unchanging. This love cannot be purchased or deserved. Our actions do not cause this love. It is a gift.

And if the One who gifts me with this love, loves everyone around me, then my natural response must be to serve all of you in laughing kinship because we are all brothers and sisters loved by the same person.

That is the circular sequence of genuine goodness. It is love for love till all know love and love in return. And this is the circle: that Jesus is the source of all my goodness and your goodness, and the end of it, too. And this is what the circle

is; it's a habit. The habit of goodness.

The cause of the habit of goodness cannot be a love which demands some return, whose approval we must earn, whose feelings are affected by the body, tired, sick, irritated, hungry, grumpy, or old. This love cannot be human, though humans may glow with its image. It must be divine. You know, don't you? It must be God.

But yet it must be accessible, here, hugging and fleshly; made in our image; alive as we are alive and knowing the worst that we know, even death. It must be human. After all, who loves as my mother did, stroking my cheek with tears? You know. It is God. The incarnate God. Christ.

Now I read to you from our text from 1 John. Listen to it all the way through, and hear perhaps an echo of what I've just said. But remember this echo comes from the source, this comes from God.

1 John 3:1-3 . . . See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

It is the love of God which surrounds us here. It is the hope, it is the F.A.I.T.H., it is the promise that God will meet us face to face hereafter that

becomes the source of our goodness.

Oh, I remember Marilus and her goodness. She died. She knows what the face of God looks like. I pray now for that sort of goodness for us, from God, for you.

Almighty God, by your grace we are your children. As your children we have something of your character in us. It is a gift. You have given us that character for no deserving of our own, but it is also within us. Our prayer, O Lord, is that we would act according to that character, that we would be less self-centered, that we would be more filled with your image, your love – that that love might be shed upon the world around us. O Lord God, this is goodness. It is Godness. O Lord God, we beg that goodness, that Godness within us, and at the same time we know that you hear such a prayer, that you will answer it because this precisely is what you have promised us. Amen.

#804 - Come Down, O Love Divine