

Reflection
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Proverbs 31 & Psalm 1

On many Sundays, Pastor Tremba makes a simple declaration: "You are good." And we nod our heads at the truth of that, and also at the relief of it. But whenever he says it, I wonder, "Is that actually true? Am I good?"

This is not an academic question to me. It has dogged and driven me all of my life.

Today's readings go straight to the question of goodness. And taken together, they help me see this yes-and-no understanding that I have of my own worth.

The first reading today is from Proverbs 31. Read literally, it is an exhaustive job description for the "capable" wife. I'm going to read a few excerpts. But first, Jade and Jonah, Morgan and Patrick, cover your ears.

A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.
She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.
She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household
She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.
She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her.

And, literally, that's not the half of it.

OK... there's plenty that strikes me about this reading. But one thing that really jumps out about the "capable wife" is that her goodness is *all up to her*. She is the raw material, the manufacturer and the distributor of her own value. God – except for maybe the fear of him - has nothing to do with it.

We can dismiss this passage as archaic and chauvinistic. But it's hard to dismiss its heavy inheritance. Whether from the Bible, our families, our schools or culture – we *all*, men and women, receive messages that our goodness is not a given. It is something we must *achieve* by striving, without end, toward standard that will always elude us.

But as far as I can tell, this quest for goodness doesn't actually lead there. As Richard Rohr says, "It doesn't transform anyone into a compassionate, loving individual. Instead it leads to a kind of morbid self-analysis in which people feel guilty, inferior, and inadequate or superior and self-righteous."

And - I would add - exhausted.

How many of us know first-hand the pain of this quest and its dry results?

So where *do* we find more generative guidance about what it means to be "good"? We can find it in the second reading for today, Psalm 1... especially as Pastor Steve has interpreted it. Again, an excerpt:

I delight in *you*, God,

mindful of your love every moment.
I am like a tree planted by a lovely stream.
May I yield the fruit of *your* love.

Unlike in Proverbs, where goodness is *garnered* through heroic effort and stamina, Psalm 1 tells us that goodness is borne of deep receipt. Our worth is not of our own making or cleverness. Rather, it arises from the willingness to take in the sustenance *that's always right under our feet*.

The metaphor of the tree planted by a stream suggests that when we allow ourselves to be nourished, goodness is the fruit that organically results. It doesn't happen without effort, but it does largely, happen without push.

This notion rocks my world. No striving toward some impossible ideal? Just allowing ourselves to be well-watered and trusting in the outcome? I can barely understand this – much less live it. But I'd sure like to learn.

I'd have to learn to trust that this tree, as imperfect and lightning-struck as it is, is good. I'd have to learn to believe that well-nourished action – however simple or small - will be sweet fruit, free of the bitter aftertaste of depletion and resentment. And I'd have to learn how to travel more regularly to that tender and sacred place where the roots and the river meet.

But *how* do I learn this? How do I *live* this more ecological relationship to goodness... to God?

Certainly, not by willing it. I think we learn through practice – gently.

Here's how I might start.

- I could start paying more attention to all the ways in which God's love is already soaking my roots.
- I could stop "leaning in" so much and wait more.
- I could resist saying the "yeses" that are driven by fear, obligation, or hallucination about what a good person would do.
- I could try to discern more clearly what "fruit" is authentically mine to give,
- And I could try giving *that* more often and freely.
- And then I could see what happens.

"You. Are. good." What a radical notion. What a healing invitation for ourselves, each other and our world. May we **all** drink well and fully, and learn to trust, down to our roots, that live-giving goodness will be the natural arising.