

LEARNING TO DO GOOD

August 10, 2025

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Rev. Dean Feldmeyer

Kindness is a learned skill.

LESLIE SACKS

Volunteers and workers at the Asheville, South Carolina Humane Society said that it was a moment that every shelter employee dreams about. One Saturday in 2019, a woman named Leslie Sacks and her two kids walked through their front doors and said, "Which two dogs have been here the longest, with the most special needs? I'm here to take them both home with me."

Those two unwanted dogs turned out to be Sam, who had extensive medical issues and had been at the shelter for six months, and Brutus, who had severe separation anxiety and had been there for five months. "I'm glad to give them a home for the last couple years of their life," said an emotional Leslie. "And they give so much love back."

The Asheville Humane Society posted a video of Sam and Brutus getting ready to head home with their new mom, saying there wasn't a dry eye in sight! Leslie assured the old pair that they now had a family to love them for the rest of their days and would never be alone again.

ROBBIE GAY

The following year, 9-year-old Robbie Gay of Palm Coast, Florida saw a rerun with an update about Leslie Sacks on the CBS evening news which he watches and discusses every evening with his parents. Or, I should say, his new adoptive parents, Maria and Charles Gay.

"He knows what it feels like not to be loved and cared for. He's the most hopeful, optimistic, and genuinely caring kid who has absolutely no reason to be that way," said Maria. She said before he entered the foster system, Robbie was a holy terror, so badly abused that he was twice hospitalized with brain injuries. Then, two years ago, the Gays adopted him.

He has come a long way except in this one respect: Maria said he could not cry. Despite the horrors of his past, or maybe because of them, the kid was a stone until earlier this month. One of Robbie's old dogs, Buffy, had to be put down. He wanted to hold her until the very end and insisted his mom take pictures of the process, perhaps because he knew what was about to happen.

After Robbie finally let go, he told his mom, "I know how it feels not to be loved or cared for and I don't want any animal of mine to feel that way." Nor does he want any foster kid to feel that way. Someday, Robbie wants to adopt older foster children himself. But until then, to show his commitment and do what he can, he has vowed to adopt as many old dogs as his parents will allow. So far, they have six.

Robbie Gay loves an underdog, Maria says. We go to the Flagler County Humane Society in Palm Coast, Florida, and ask him to find a favorite, he will seek out the oldest, mangiest, least-adoptable mutt of the lot. Recently they adopted a lame, snaggletooth shih tzu mutt named Molly, after Molly's owner had to go into assisted living.

"He is so aware that it could have gone totally differently for him. And in these older dogs Robbie has found a place to practice compassion," Maria said.

Today, Robbie started volunteering at the humane society, where he has become a powerful advocate for older dogs. He has inspired dozens of adoptions, all to loving families.

ZACK SKOW

A couple of years later, someone told Zack Skow, in Kentucky, about what Robbie was doing and Zack thought about it for a few days and then said, "What the heck."

He went to the local shelter and adopted Henry, a 16-year-old dog with many limitations and ailments, the type of dog that is usually the last to be adopted in a shelter. Henry is a medium-sized mixed breed who had been in the shelter for several months and Zach says he adopted him so that he would be well taken care of before he died. Also, he wanted Henry to have company on his last days.

When Zach adopted this Henry, he had trouble seeing with his only eye, had a hearing disability, and did not want to walk. "You could just tell he was really confused," Zach said. But Zack continued to take care of him. He fed him, played with him, talked to him, held him, and even sang to him. Mostly, he says, he just wanted this canine to "get him home and get him loved." Almost miraculously, however, Henry began to improve.

Three months after he was adopted, practically on death's door, he was running in Zack's his vast back yard, and galloping as if he was half his age. Zach said, "My boy is very excited to see me. He's doing very, very great." Henry plays fetch, follows him around, and even cuddles with him on the couch when he watches TV.

Apparently, Henry hasn't quite reached the end of his life, thanks to the kindness of Zach who caught the bug from Robbie, who caught the bug from Leslie all of whom, somewhere along the line, somehow learned to do good.

Doing may not be a natural thing for us, but it can be learned. That's the first lesson from today's scripture.

THE DOING GOOD LEARNING CURVE

The book of Isaiah is actually two books that got accidentally combined at some point in Hebrew history, probably because they were written by two men with the same name. Today scholars divide the book into two sections (some say 3 and some say 4 but for our purposes, today, we'll go with two). The first 33 chapters are usually referred to as Isaiah of Jerusalem and it is from those chapters that our lesson for today is drawn.

The Prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem began his career as a prophet in the year 740 BCE. We know that because, in his book, he tells us so. “In the year that King Uzziah died,” he says. And that year was 740 BCE. He was called to prophetic ministry through a vision that he had while attending the state funeral for the king.

Uzziah had been a promising king, so promising that some thought he might be the promised messiah. But then, in about 733 BC he contracted leprosy and locked himself in the palace. He made his son, Jotham, co-regent and they ruled together until Uzziah’s death in 740.

Jotham turned out to be a disappointment as kings go. Isaiah had hoped that he would continue his father’s rule, his vision, his charity, his strength and morality but, alas, Jotham was a mere shadow of his dad. He was petulant, mean, petty, selfish, and ruthless, and morally bankrupt.

Isaiah’s primary problem with Jotham was that he always gave favorable judgements to the wealthy who, in return, rewarded him generously with gifts to the palace and the king’s family. Those wealthy aristocrats and plutocrats assumed, then, that they had the favor of the king and proceeded to live as they chose, disobeying the ancient laws, and being crooked and unscrupulous in their business lives.

Oh, they looked good. They were in church every week, dressed up in their fine clothes, giving big buck to the offering. They knew the words to all the hymns and prayers, and they prayed and sang louder than anyone. But when they went home, their private lives were stained with immorality.

So disgusted was Isaiah by their behavior that, in his book he refers to them as “people of Gomorrah.” Their offerings of big rams and well-fed calves mean nothing to God he says. Lambs and goats sacrificed on the altar are so much dross, the flotsam and jetsam of corrupt lives and impure living. God is sick of their religious festivals, their hymns hurt his ears, their prayers make him nauseous. He refuses to listen to them.

So, what is it that God wants from his people if not expensive sacrifices on the altar and big checks in the offering plate?

Isaiah tells them straight up: “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” In other words, stop scoffing at the law in your business lives. Stop cheating your customers and start paying your workers a living wage every day.

Learn to do good. See! It’s a learned skill. We can do good but first we must figure out what good is. So, he says, figure it out. And then do it. It isn’t really all that tough. Here, I’ll give you some examples, he says:

1. Seek justice. Oh, I know that “justice” is a bad word, these days. We liberals have nearly ruined it by attaching it to everything from prison conditions to the environment but that doesn’t mean that we can just ignore justice issues. Seeking justice for those

who are victimized AND for those who are accused is the true work of the People of God. It's not easy but it's what God calls us to do.

2. Rescue the oppressed. That is, those who are subject to harsh and authoritarian treatment. God says, you don't ask "What's in it for me," you just do it. First you enable them to free themselves from oppression and if that doesn't work, you take some risks in freeing them yourselves.
3. Defend the orphan and plead for the widow. Where do you defend and plead for people? In court, of course. Isaiah is talking about standing up for the powerless, the helpless and hopeless, those who are being abused in court by the rich who exploited the law to take from those who were already poor and helpless.

The favorite method of the day was to loan money to those who had no one to support them and then, when the loan came due and the poor people you loaned it to couldn't repay you, you take them to and have them indentured to your estate, in other words you make them your slaves for life because the interest on the loan that you gave them is so high they will never be able to pay off the loan.

Isaiah says that God is calling upon us to put an end to this kind of practice, using the law and the courts to enslave those who are poor and unsupported.

Look! Be reasonable, he says. Your sins are like scarlet stains, right now but they can be removed. If you do as God requires of you, give up your hypocrisy and start taking care of those who are less fortunate than yourself, your sins can be forgiven and they will be.

But if you don't make things right... well...

JUSTICE DELAYED IS JUSTICE DENIED

Larry Eugene Price, Jr.

On August 19, 2020, Larry Eugene Price, Jr., wandered into the small northwest Arkansas police station as he did nearly every day. Police in the town of Fort Smith were used to seeing Larry, then 50, coming in, hanging around for a bit, then leaving.

But on that day, Larry, who was homeless and diagnosed schizophrenic with bipolar disorder, PTSD, and an IQ below 55, made his hand into a gun as children often do and pointed around the station and at officers, threatening and cursing at them. The officers, seemingly concerned for his wellbeing and the safety of those in the station, arrested him on a state felony – terroristic threatening in the first degree.

Standing 6-foot-2 and just under 200 pounds, Larry, according to police reports, wasn't an immediate threat. He had no real weapon. But he was wound up and there was no settling him down or reasoning with him, so he was handcuffed and taken to the Sebastian County Detention Center, which handles inmates from Fort Smith. He was locked up, then went

before a judge who set bond at \$1,000. It was simple – he would have been free with \$100 for bail, but he was destitute.

After that, everything that could have gone wrong did. His mind lost, his health gone – and seemingly no one paying attention to his wellbeing, he was simply forgotten. Three months later, he was found dead, in a solitary confinement cell with his eyes wide open, naked, starved, dried saliva on the corners of his mouth, in a pool of standing water so large his feet had shriveled. He had long since had his medication taken away. Cause of death: Starvation.

There are a lot of ironies at play in this story, but the worst is that all of this happened to a man who was in jail, not because he was serving a sentence. He had not been convicted of anything. In fact, he had not been tried. The only reason he was in jail was that he could not afford \$100 for bail.

According to the Bail Project, a non-profit organization who helps poor, non-violent, people who have committed minor offences make bail so they can get out of jail, Larry's story is not a common one, thank God, but neither is it unheard of. In the past ten years more than 60 people, all non-violent minor offenders have died in jail because they didn't have enough money to get out on bail.

About 7 million people are incarcerated in this country every year. Of those, 2.7 million are people who have committed minor, non-violent offences but they are held in jail simply because they can't afford bail often as little as \$100. They have not been tried for a crime. They have not been convicted of anything. They just can't afford the bail. These people stay in jail an average of 30 days, some as long as a year. In one case a man was jailed for 3 years because he couldn't afford bail and his case got lost in the courthouse bureaucracy. When his case came to trial, the judge dismissed the charges for lack of evidence.

The tragedy is not just the long amount of time spent by these people in jail, it's what happens to their lives while they are there. If they are jailed for more than a couple of days, they usually lose their job. When they lose their job, they can't pay their car payment, so their car is repossessed. Without a car they can't get to another job so they can't pay their rent, and they get evicted from their home or apartment. Now they and their family are homeless for no other reason than they couldn't afford bail money that is often as little as \$100-500.

I don't need to say that this happens more often to people of color – black and Hispanic – poor people than to middle class or wealthy white folks.

And it is this kind of injustice that the prophet Isaiah says God wants us to fight against. Protect the orphan; plead for the widow, he says. Help the helpless, the weak, the disadvantaged, the underprivileged. And it's this kind of injustice the St. Louis Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. is working to end.

Last year, their General Assembly (the equivalent of our General Conference) voted to partner with the Bail Project to advocate for changes to the Cash Bail system but they didn't just talk the talk. They walked the walk.

They took up an offering and raised \$50,000 which was used by the Bail Project to pay the bail for more than 100 people who were charged with non-violent, minor offenses.

No one is saying that people accused of violent crimes and those who are likely to flee shouldn't be detained for the protection of the community. That extreme caution, however, must be paired with and mitigated by the prohibitions that are given in the Constitution and the Bible, two documents that we claim to revere, and both of which prohibit the detention of people who have not been convicted of a crime and are, thus, presumed to be innocent under the law.

And in the New Testament of that same Bible Jesus admonishes us to learn to do what is kind. To "cease doing evil, learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan, plead for the widow" so that all the world will see that the God we worship is a God of grace, of love, of kindness and, yes, of justice, too.

AMEN