

**“What I Know For Sure”**  
**Psalm 22, Mark 10:17-31**  
**October 14, 2018**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

It was thirty years ago this week that I first visited this church. I came for an interview to see if the Pastor Nominating Committee wanted me to come be the pastor here. I remember meeting with them, thinking about the issues that were facing the church and my family, and the committee looking to me to be the expert to come in and help. I remember driving away from the interview; I had been the solo pastor of a church for the last four and a half years, I had a degree from a prestigious seminary, I had a wife and two children, I was about to turn thirty years old, and I felt like I knew nothing. I felt like an imposter, like I was pulling the wool over these people's eyes, pretending that I could come and be their pastor, give their church what they needed. Kristi Ryan later said she was glad that I had turned 30 the weekend that I was here, so that they could tell this congregation that the person they were recommending to be the new pastor was “in his thirties.”

I had them fooled. I knew nothing. But here I am. Thirty years later. I will turn 60 this week. Surely I've learned something in those years. Surely I know some things by now. What do I know? What do I know to be true? What is it that I know for sure?

Well, there's lots of facts I know. I'm one whose mind is filled with plenty of useless trivia. But what do I know about being a pastor? What do I know about the people I serve? What do I know about the God that we all serve? That's the real question, because that's where we live, in community with one another. What do we know for sure about each other? What has experience taught us?

Last week one of our readings for the day was from Psalm 8. In that reading the psalmist proclaims that God has made human beings just a little lower than the angels. Do you think that is true? In Psalm 22, the one that Steve just read for us, the psalmist says, “I am a worm, and not human; scorned and despised.” Which of those things is true? What is true about human beings? Are we good? Are we not? One of the first classes I had in college was a required course for all freshmen on the Judeo

Christian tradition. And the first day of class, we discussed human nature. The professors stood on opposite sides of the lecture hall and one of them had a sign that said, "A little lower than the angels." The other wore a sign that said, "A worm in the mud." All the students had to get out of their seats and go stand by the sign that they thought was right. If we thought that people were basically good, we went to one side, if we thought they were basically selfish and evil, we went the other way. If we thought that human beings were a mix of the two, we stood somewhere in the center. Now I had gone through high school as part of a good Presbyterian church which believed in Calvin's idea of total depravity. Humans are totally depraved, everything we do is touched by sin and we have no power to save ourselves, therefore we are totally dependent on the grace of God. I went and stood on the side of the room that was the worms in the mud. Where would you have stood? Are we good, or are we evil? Are we creations of God that he called "very good?" Or are we fallen creatures infected by sin to the core of our being? When Jesus tells the young man that "no one is good, but God alone," what does that mean for us?

In these years of being a minister, I can tell you that people are sinful. We are selfish creatures who very often do what we think is right for us, what will get us the greatest reward, will avoid the least amount of trouble, what will make us feel best about ourselves. One would think that because we are the church, that we are those whom God has called to do his work, that of all people the church would draw the best of humanity, that here above all other places one would see how selfless people can be. Those of you who have been in the church any length of time, those of you who have served on a committee or been in a class, know that the church is just as human, just as fallible as the rest of humanity. Maybe the only thing that saves us is that we are trying to do better, at least I hope we are. But we are sinful creatures, all of us. It has been said that the church is like Noah's ark; if it wasn't for the storm outside, it would be hard to stand the stench inside. We are sinful creatures. I know that for sure. Because I am one too. In thirty plus years of ministry, I have prayed and studied and meditated and turned myself over to God, a hundred times. A thousand times. And I am sinful. I have been

selfish and self-serving and avoiding of responsibility and just plain fearful. I know human beings are sinful because I am one and I am.

But the psalm says that God has created us just a little lower than the angels. We are part of God's good creation. And that's true too. George Shinn was a nineteenth century pastor in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. He was summoned once at midnight to the bedside of an old woman who lived by herself without much in the way of either money or friends and was dying. She managed to convey that she wanted some other woman to come and stay with her for such time as she might have left, so George Shinn and the old woman's doctor struck out in the darkness to try to dig one up for her. They knocked at doors and threw pebbles at second story windows. One woman said she couldn't come because she had children. Another said she simply wouldn't know what to do, what to be, in a crisis like that. Another was suspicious of two men prowling around at that hour of night and wouldn't even talk to them. But finally, as the memoir of Dr. Shinn puts it in the prose of another age, "They rapped at the humble door of an Irish woman, the mother of a brood of children. She put her head out of the window. "Who's there?" she said. "And what can you want at this time of night?" They tell her the situation. Her warm, Irish heart cannot resist. "Will you come?" "Sure and I'll come, and I'll do the best I can." And she did come," the account ends. "She did the best she could."<sup>1</sup>

People are kind and giving and wonderful and do the best they can. That's true too. And that's my experience as well. That's my experience with you. That when you are asked to give, or to take up a task, or to forgive, or to help, that you do the best you can. I know for sure that people are good, and kind, and beautiful.

So which is it? Are people good or bad? Selfish or giving? Kind or cruel? Yes. We are both of those things. The problem comes when we begin to see this as a binary equation, an either/or. A very wise man, who celebrates his 99<sup>th</sup> birthday tomorrow, used to tell us in Thursday morning Bible study, that if you can boil a question down to an either/or answer, that it has to be one way or the other, then you

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick, *Listening to your life*



obviously didn't understand the question. The problem comes, I think, when we view people as good or evil. When we take a class of people or a race or a nation or a religion or a political party or even an individual person and we say that they are evil and anything they do we will be against, or when we call them good and we will support whatever they do without even thinking about it because it comes from them, so it must be good, then we have left the path of wisdom. As Jesus says, no one is good but God alone. The rest of us are a mix of good and evil, of kindness and cruelty, of wonderful deeds and terrible mistakes. They are in all of us.

When I was a commissioner to the General Assembly of the church back in 1998, one of the leaders would stand to do announcements in front of those thousands of people and everytime he stood up he would go to the microphone and say, "God is good." and the people would reply, "All the time." And then he would say, "All the time" and we would reply, "God is good." Do I know that for sure? That God is good? That is certainly my experience and it is certainly my hope. It's what I'm betting my life on. That even though I know for sure that we are a crazy mix of motivations and secrets and fears and good intentions, my hope beyond hope is that God is good. All the time.