

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Reflection
Sunday February 5, 2023 – 5th Sunday After The Epiphany

WORSHIP FOCUS: Righteousness

Righteousness is not that you turn your faces to the east and the west [in prayer]. But righteous is the one who believes in God, the Last Day, the Angels, the Scripture and the Prophets; who gives his wealth in spite of love for it to kinsfolk, orphans, the poor, the wayfarer, to those who ask and to set slaves free. And (righteous are) those who pray, pay alms, honour their agreements, and are patient in (times of) poverty, ailment and during conflict. Such are the people of truth. And they are the God-Fearing. - *The Quran 2:177*

CALL TO WORSHIP: Psalm 112:1-9 (Text NRSV, refrain Voices United pg. 834)

Sing: The just shall trust in God alone.

One: Praise the LORD!

**All: Happy are those who fear the LORD,
Who greatly delight in his commandments.**

One: Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
The generation of the upright will be blessed.

**All: Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures forever.**

One: They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
They are gracious, merciful, and righteous.

**All: It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
Who conduct their affairs with justice.**

Sing: The just shall trust in God alone.

One: For the righteous will never be moved;
They will be remembered forever.

**All: They are not afraid of evil tidings;
Their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD.**

One: Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
In the end they will look in triumph on their foes.

**All: They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
Their righteousness endures forever;
Their horn is exalted in honor.**

Sing: The just shall trust in God alone.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

SECOND LESSON: Matthew 5:13-20 (NRSV)

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

REFLECTION: “Light and Righteousness”

This week, as I was planning this reflection, I told a few people that righteousness was going to be our theme, and all of them got a little nervous looking, including the child of a minister who simply looked at me and said worryingly, “Oh Dear.”

‘Righteousness’ is a term that many shy away from. When we die, we don’t want people eulogizing us by describing how righteous we were in life. For some reason, the term righteousness often brings to mind people who are not particularly pleasant: self-righteous people, for instance, or people filled with righteous indignation.

Indeed, there is a stereotype in Western society of the righteous person which usually involves someone who is extremely sure of themselves, outwardly faithful, but at the same time, often extremely inflexible and critical of others in their hearts and actions. For some weird reason, when we think of righteous people, we think of precisely the people who our reading from Isaiah tells us are most certainly not righteous: people who follow religious observances to the letter of the law, not in the interest of God, but for their own interest – their own power and control; people who fast in order to be noticed; people who only humble themselves for rewards; people whose religious observance really serves their own interests and ignores others. Isaiah writes of people who follow religious observances, not for the love of God, but in fact to quarrel and to fight and to

strike with a wicked fist. And, Isaiah points out that such behaviours, rather than being righteous and attracting God's attention, will not make the outwardly righteous looking person noticed by God.

So, what we think of as righteousness is perhaps not righteousness. Perhaps righteousness has gotten a bad name. Perhaps righteousness is something else.

I first started to think critically about righteousness when I was a student minister at Bloomfield United Church in Prince Edward County. Bloomfield was an interesting place to work, because, although the church was a United Church, about half of the membership had Quaker origins. As you know, different denominations use language a little differently, and these Quakers certainly did. It was very common for instance, if I were to ask a member of the congregation how they were feeling, or doing, for them to reply – I am feeling righteous.

The first time I heard someone say that to me, I actually thought they were going to come into my office and tear a strip off of me for some decision the council had recently made. And yet, the woman who said these words to me was not angry, she was radiant. She was happy. It took me a while, but I came to learn that when people in that church told me that they were feeling righteous, that it was a good thing. It meant that they felt God's presence in their lives, and felt aligned to that love.

As a divinity student at Queen's School of Religion, I continued to be curious about the word. I remain curious about the word today. And I have come to understand that righteousness, although it is a difficult word to get past, to use in everyday conversation, is an extremely important concept. I am coming to see that righteousness is related to light, and that those who are righteous, are the light of the world.

Righteousness involves being right in not just one way. Righteousness is the spiritual practice of being totally attuned to Christ and God's way. Righteousness hears the spirit. It combines what we call orthopraxis with orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is right belief. Orthopraxis is right practice. A righteous person lives in such a way that their belief in a loving, forgiving, creating God extends not just to their thoughts and claims of right and wrong, but to their actions. And not just in their outward religious observances – but in their actions towards others and in their community. To put it a simpler way, if we are righteous, others see us not just as people who talk about God and worship God, but as persons living in such a way that God's love is revealed in us.

This is certainly the Jewish idea of righteousness. And it is certainly the Muslim view of righteousness. I like Mohammed's definition very much.

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Righteousness is not just people who can cling to the truth and spout out doctrine. Righteous people are people who in their actions, we can see that truth and that doctrine lived out. Righteous people live in a kind of spiritual attunement. They hear the song of the Kingdom at all times, and respond to it.

It is for this reason that our Psalm for today, and Isaiah, and Jesus tells us that the righteous are so important. They are the light of the world. Their light shall break forth like the dawn, and their healing shall spring up quickly. They shall be like a light to their people. Our Psalm repeats the word over and over again.

*The righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever. They are not afraid of evil tidings; Their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD. Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid; In the end they will look in triumph on their foes.
They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; Their righteousness endures forever; Their horn is exalted in honour.*

That's a tough order, a complete way of living and thinking and being. It is hard work to be righteous. And maybe that is why we don't like to use the word. Maybe that is why it is out of favour. It is too difficult a calling. Or maybe that is the point, only a few will ever be truly righteous.

Some of you may have heard of the honorific, "Righteous amongst the nations." It is a title developed by a Jewish organization called Yad Vashem, following the Second World War. It is bestowed on those Gentiles who assisted Jewish families, children and individuals escape from the Nazis. There are only about 27,000 people in the whole world who are recognized as such. A very small number. And some of them, like King Charles' mother, Princess Alice, only saved one or two families. Some like Miep, the woman who tried to hide the Frank family, were only partially successful. There were not many who were able to do as much as Oscar Schindler.

And yet they were righteous. They did the right thing. They were enough light for the world. Hitler's final solution was not final. And the righteous amongst the nations were hugely responsible for that.

Although there were so few.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

I think that is the other reason we don't like to be righteous. It means that we will be part of a very small and vulnerable cohort of people. It means being able to be comfortable with being a minority.

To be righteous is to commit to being that small thing. That sprinkling of salt, that makes everything taste better. That candle flickering in the dark, that lights the heart of the lonely.

Beloved, in this time of darkness, we need a little righteousness. We need a little bit of salt. A little bit of our own light. We need to trust that our small actions, our right living and thinking, matter. I know that they do. I know that they matter to your children, to your friends and loved ones, and to this community.

You are beacons of righteousness.

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Small things count. Righteousness counts. The world needs a little righteousness. May the righteousness of your lives – your salt – your light – be enough. May our righteousness be just what the world needs today.