

Scripture Reading

Psalm 97

The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!
Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
Fire goes before him,
and consumes his adversaries on every side.
His lightnings light up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
before the Lord of all the earth.

The heavens proclaim his righteousness;
and all the peoples behold his glory.
All worshippers of images are put to shame,
those who make their boast in worthless idols;
all gods bow down before him.
Zion hears and is glad,
and the towns of Judah rejoice,
because of your judgements, O God.
For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.

The Lord loves those who hate evil;
he guards the lives of his faithful;
he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.
Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright in heart.
Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous,
and give thanks to his holy name!

Matthew 5:6

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Children's Sermon

- Hand out some lego's, but give fewer to some, more to others.
- Ask them if it is fair that some got less, some more. Ask them what fair means.

Today we are talking about something similar to being fair. It is called righteousness. Does anyone know what that means? It is almost the same as fair. As a matter of fact, if one is fair, one is showing that they are righteous inside their heart and mind. It means to think in a way that cares for the needs of others more than themselves. It is a way that says that we need to live in a right way, a way of love, and compassion. That leads us to share what we have with one another so that we all can enjoy.

Sermon

“That's not fair!” These three words can at times be the most annoying words one can hear. Now do not get me wrong; we should alert ourselves whenever we here them. They can deal with a real injustice. But when I hear it

from my boys, my tolerance shifts, my eyes roll back, and it is like scratching your nails on a chalkboard. My eldest son often talks to me about how things are not fair all the time. It is not fair that he cannot play games throughout the week, and yet his friends are able to. It is unfair that he has to cleanup his bed all by himself, but the younger ones get help. My middle son Jio says its unfair that RJ got to spend 1.657 hours playing a video game on the weekend, and he only spent .47654 hours playing before he had to stop. Yes, jio is thorough in making sure fairness is spread across the board, and RJ as well. Fairness here deals with showing impartiality, no discrimination. All have the same access. But as we all know, life isn't always about fairness, but what is best, what is just, what is the better thing to do, because one has access to information others, like my son, is not privy to. Like the addictive qualities of video games, or the need to balance technology with other activities, like good ole reading. Seeking the better of things, righteousness is not better for me, but for him.

The scripture passage that we are reflecting on states that those who hunger/thirst for righteousness will be satisfied. Being fair is a part of righteousness. It falls within the process of righteousness. Being fair is providing resources that can maximize the individual to do well, to succeed. It reminds me of the passage in Acts when the hellenistic widows cried out that they were not

being given food. It was not fair, and that tugs within us to deal with the level of injustice. Yes, righteousness is intertwined with justice and fairness, not that everyone is given equality, but more that everyone is given what is needed so that they may be able to experience life in a just way.

So when Jesus is speaking on the Mount, and this parallels Moses speaking from Mount Sinai, showing that Christ is the one who continues the way, he is speaking about spiritual matters that echo on in our actual lives. And, from what we have been reflecting on in the past couple of weeks, these are not simple modes of action. Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek. Just as a note, Luke's version of the beatitudes are much more...to the point. Luke wants one to take action. Matthew here is showing how Jesus as the Christ is the fulfillment of the Laws of Moses, but calls us to go even beyond the law, by revealing how we are to harmonize with the world around us.

But what does it mean to be righteous? It has to do with showing mercy, and being radically pure in your heart, and making peace instead of retaliating. Righteousness is showing mercy to other people; and righteousness is being pure in heart before God who alone can see the heart; and righteousness is the effort to make peace. And this continues in the passages after the beatitudes. The parables and passages in which Jesus teaches from deal with mercy, seeking the best in

others, and in making peace. In the parable of the good samaritan, the stranger shows mercy to his neighbor, a stranger at the best. Righteousness deals with how one is called to think, to identify a certain lens that is imperative to seeing and acting in a world that acts differently than that of the kingdom. The African American New Testament Scholar Obery Hendricks, discusses in his book the Politics of Jesus that righteousness is not meant as just dealing with one's own personal piety, but must also involve the "active, purposeful transformation of the entire social and political order. Righteousness in personal piety means nothing unless it engages with the spiritual and social aspects of our lives. It affects us both internally and externally. This further echoes the Psalm 97 passage which reads that the foundations of God's throne are righteousness and justice. Right thinking and right action, girded together by mercy, purity of heart, and the seeking of peace, is a holistic response, a response of the self.

If I may note, right thinking alone is not enough. There has been a lot of ridicule towards the church, because of the use of the words "i'll be praying for you." There is some truth to this matter. Many believe that this function alone is capable of getting the task done. Although I would not argue that, I would add that it is also necessary that prayer becomes coupled with action, that our words be coupled with some action that show the force of prayer working in the midst of the

real world. Acts of mercy, acts of kindness, acts of restoration. Without this one cannot see the transforming and restoring power that the community of God experiences. The ritual act of the table that we call communion speaks to our constant reminder that it feeds both our physical as well as spiritual needs. And this must be reciprocated in every other thing we do.

And so in the same way that we hunger and thirst for the bread and the cup, to partake and be a part of this moment, we must in the same way hunger and thirst for righteousness seeking out the good, not only for self but for others.

Righteousness is the girding foundation in the passage in the Psalm we read.

God's throne is girded in part by righteousness, and therefore justice. So inwardly, we desire the best for all, and outwardly are actions show it. Are we hungering for righteousness when it comes to local issues such as sustainable housing? How about the immigration debate? Climate crisis? Increasing student debt? In the increase of homelessness? What does mercy look like in this case? What does peace look like from these perspectives?

When Jesus uses the word hunger he is relating our spiritual need for righteousness, is parallel to being hungry for that which is necessary for life, for sustenance, for growth. When one hungers, one seeks to be satiated, to no longer feel that hunger. Hunger and thirst, food and water, basic necessities for life.

Righteousness is a basic necessity of life, and without it what dies is our ability to think about others. Righteousness forces us to question, “how do I help? How can I hunger for righteousness, for what is right, to do what is important, beyond service in church? What can I give?” A difficult question indeed.

Righteousness, when viewed through a lens of mercy, peace-making, and empathy, moves us from within to act out in the world out there. Righteousness is found in the giving of one’s cloak, of healing wounds with balm, and paying for hotel fees until the samaritan is better. It is the opening of one’s own understanding to learn anew a different perspective, like the syrophenician woman who had the demon possessed daughter and implored Jesus to heal her. It is the giving of one’s time volunteering, so that opera’s run well. It is coming to the sanctuary on a wednesday, to make sure the sanctuary is tidy, and that the prayer list is up to date. It is riding our fellow members to their homes. It is giving out of what little we can give. Righteousness is a call for making things right, making things better not for ourselves but for others, out of the abundance of what we have.

When we have a congregation that gathers together, that envision God’s world in this place, than we grasp the second part of the verse, they will be satisfied. When we are seeking righteousness together, when we work together to

make this world, this place a better one, when we gather together and live out in the community through service, we will be comforted.

Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran minister, who at first was for the Nazi regime, then vehemently against. He is famous for this quote that I am about to say. It fits well because it gets at the heart of what it means to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and to put it into action by more than words, but in political action, action that moves beyond ourselves. He writes,

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

To hunger for righteousness means to seek out and act for those who are marginalized, forgotten, rejected. To speak out in righteousness is to lift and protect them, even if one is in a minority space. That is the way of Christ, one that is merciful, radical, and seeks out peace for all.

May the Lord bless the reflection.

Communion

Jesus broke bread with all sorts of people throughout his life: with sinners, with the self-righteous, with hungry crowds, and, most often, with his disciples. It was in the breaking of bread that the travelers to Emmaus recognized him. When the first Christians gathered on the Lord's Day to share in a meal of Christ's remembrance, they spoke of it as "the breaking of the bread." Breaking bread was an act of love, an act of God's righteousness and justice through Jesus action. It was and continues to be a place of mercy, radical grace, and a place of peace.

That evening Christ took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'²⁰ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant.

With all God's faithful, let us pray and then break bread together in communion with Christ and with one another.

Let us share the cup together, as a sign of the covenant.

If we may all rise if you are able and sing the closing hymn.