

Covenant Word

Exceeding Righteousness

Isaiah 58:6-9a; Psalm 112:1-10; Matthew 5:13-20

*A Message by
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Sunday
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It is not how I want to be described or remembered! A believer, maybe, or faithful! ...but righteous? And not just righteous, but “exceedingly righteous... more so than the scribes or Pharisees,” which really puts me in a bind because then I have to be more righteous than all those I stand in judgement of and, if I am honest, of whom I make fun! It sounds so holier-than-thou...so sanctimonious. It feels like I need a shower should someone say of me, “Oh, you! You are so exceedingly righteous!”

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.**

Sarah Shelton

But, there it is. Right there in the gospel reading, the Sermon on the Mount, some of the first recorded words right out of Jesus’ mouth. Jesus tells the disciples, and us, that we must possess “exceeding righteousness.” Now Jesus means more than punctilious moralism, (Walter Brueggemann, “An Offer,” p. 51, Volume 2 of his sermons) more than keeping a punch list of right and wrong. Jesus is speaking here of being fully human, not successful, not good, not rich, not better than everyone else. No, Jesus wants us to be righteous, truly human by being so rooted in the promises of God that how we treat one another and live in community brings about the Kingdom of God.

In Psalm 112, the righteous are described as merciful and gracious. They possess a healing, restorative capacity with their community. The righteous lend to the poor and conduct business justly. They possess economic generosity and use it for the benefit of the common good. The righteous do not get afraid when they hear propaganda. Instead, they remain steady. They are unflappable. They are not reactive, and so they never get hooked by the “Orange Alert anxiety” that pervades a fearful society. No, the righteous keep their cool. They have a resilience that keeps everyone calm when a state of emergency breaks. (Walter Brueggemann)

Isaiah 58 further fleshes out what it means to be a righteous person. The Israelites have been busy describing their righteousness to God. They talk about how humble they are, because they fast and bring proper sacrifices and offerings. Right in the middle of their argument, God interrupts. “You

want to know what I am looking for,” asks God? “Real righteousness looks like this: Righteousness is when you lose the bonds of injustice. Righteousness is when you undo the thongs of the yoke. Righteousness is when you let the oppressed go free. Being righteous is sharing your bread with the hungry. It is bringing the homeless poor into your own house. It is covering the naked, and it is refusing to hide from your own kinfolk.” (Ugh, this prophet has gone from preaching to meddling!) In Isaiah, real righteousness is concern for your neighbors’ bodily existence when they are without resources. Just because they are within the proximity of our beaten paths, Isaiah says, they are entitled to share in the life of this community!

I confess that I cringed when I read these words, because Jesus also tells us to seek the Kingdom and righteousness. What He’s really saying is: (Walter Brueggemann, “A New Way of Being in the World,” *A Way Other than Our Own*, p. 7)

Get your mind off yourself long enough to care; be so concerned about the well-being of the human community that you don’t have to worry about your place, your church, your class, your values, your vested interests.

We are invited to get so involved in the emergence of humanness that we do not have to defend human

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institutions in all of their effectiveness, or human relationships with all of their mystery. No, we aim for being fully human, wholeness.

And so as I studied, I became more and more anxious to uncover the ways that righteousness was being defined. Considering our current cultural climate regarding just about any defined grouping of people, I realized just how many toes I am treading on here. Some of us hear the words of Isaiah and want to cheer that the moral, high road politics is RIGHTeous, while others can barely sit in the pew for being filled with righteous indignation that the preacher would take one political stance over another. My friends! These are the words of the prophet Isaiah! These are the words of the Psalmist! These are the words of Jesus! The attributes that make for a righteous person did not just get entered into scripture. They have been there for centuries, and, yet, we still find them hard to listen to much less to do.

If they cause you political angst, then be grateful



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that our Holy Bible still speaks a clear, true message. The irony, for me, is that the unsettledness these words create in our spirit should result in positive action on behalf of others. They should bring us together not divide us. They are not open for debate about who is right and who is wrong; who believes them because they are a republican or a democrat. THESE are the ways of the righteous...a calling that we have all received and can be united around. Rather than pointing fingers; rather than getting all riled up over who posts what on Facebook or twitter; rather than allowing the evening news or NPR to occupy our thoughts and conversation to the point of obsession; rather than sulking because our ideology isn't received with support; rather than allowing disagreement to dictate our most precious relationships, what if we all rolled up our sleeves—going in directions that speak to our convictions and sought righteousness? Yes, we would all do different things, but doesn't the current state of affairs require the efforts of us all? With Lent a few short weeks away, how might the Kingdom of God gain a foothold should we give up social media for forty days and swap the time and energy focused there for acts of righteousness?

Rick Warren, of The Saddleback Church, goes on mission to Rwanda to help with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. (John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, 2-3-08, "To Make the World Better.") They have discovered that the established clinics are too far apart in order to serve those needing antiviral pills. So instead of distributing through the clinics, churches have become the distribution centers, because there is a church in every village. The church has become the effective health care provider. Good for them, we say, while sitting comfortably in our La-z Boys applauding an effort half-way around the world.

The last Sunday of October while Lloyd was beginning a marathon, Dannelly and I attended St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Washington D.C. This lovely parish sits literally in the shadow of The National Cathedral on Embassy Row. I could tell by their bulletin that St. Alban's congregation is active in community ministry, and their priest is known for her social justice preaching. But maybe you can imagine my surprise when, upon visiting the restroom, there was a large basket full of condoms and feminine hygiene products. The note on the basket read "Take What You Need." Would WE hang such items of realistic, genuine need on our fence? Don't worry, we are just asking for chap-stick and cough drops.

Jesus compares the exceedingly righteous to salt that seasons and light that shines in the darkness. He tells us to "be perfect,"

meaning "get yourself together and be like God who is merciful and generous, forgiving and abundant. (Walter Brueggemann) One of the places we most clearly know about God's righteousness is here at this table. For this table reminds us that Jesus gave His life out of love for us. It is what we, the righteous, do when we offer peace instead of division; when we offer faith instead of fear; when we offer someone a place at our table instead of turning them away, because they are different or messy or "wrong" in some way. Oh, when we behave with exceeding righteousness, we represent the very heart of Christ. The challenge is to begin today. (Shauna Niequist, *Bread and Wine*, p. 250.)

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