

Sermon, Proper 21A, September 27, 2026, Jane A. Beebe

“...John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” (Matthew 21:32)

I was ordained on the Nativity of St. John the Baptist: June 24. I tend to go on alert whenever John the Baptist makes an appearance in our Scripture readings—and especially today as it is Jesus who makes reference to him. What is this “way of righteousness?” exhibited by John? “Righteousness” is another of those Biblical words that doesn’t get used so much in regular conversation. Yet it occurs as an idea many times in the Psalms, in Isaiah, and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Paul speaks of righteousness many times in his letters—29 times in Romans alone!

To be righteous, to seek righteousness, is to live with integrity. It is literally “to be who we ought to be.” That kind of spiritual wholeness is not something human beings can readily attain on their own. It comes with trust in God. It is God who gives us what we need to be complete, to enlarge our vision. In the course of a lifetime, it may require consciously turning toward God over and over. Our turning and returning, repenting—that is a kind of turning around so that we are realigned with God’s purpose. I think of the Shaker hymn “Simple Gifts”: “...By turning, turning we come ‘round right.”

To believe that we have entered into righteousness on our own is to be *self*-righteous. The suffering and death that we inevitably experience in our own lives are beyond us to change. We can become paralyzed by those experiences—or out fear of them—but it can also be destructive to attempt to evade our limitations rather than accepting them. God knows that “we are but dust.” Yet with God’s help we can change our minds. *We have choices*. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, literally to change the mind. Surely this is what Paul means by urging us to, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” (Philippians 2:5)

The most iconic story of a human being entering into his God-given righteousness is the story of Abram before he becomes Abraham. Before Abram can become transformed, his vision must be enlarged; he has to step outside of his tent. ‘[God] brought [Abram] outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.’ (Genesis 15:5-6) Being able to count the stars is beyond the imagination of most human beings. Yet Abram chooses to look where God is pointing him: the vastness of Creation. He changes his mind about what is possible with God.

Jesus speaks of righteousness only a handful of times, making what he does say about it all the more resonant. He uses the word twice in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12. First he says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Matthew 5:6) Then he says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10) Perhaps Jesus had John the Baptist’s ministry in mind? Surely these two Beatitudes sum up John’s passion as a prophet, his laser focus on the coming Kingdom.

Both cousins preach repentance as the first step towards finding God’s Kingdom. To mark this turning and re-turning, John offers baptism. It takes a certain humility to approach the water, recognizing that there is something lacking, something that must be changed. Coming out of the water is another challenge: once we are transformed, how will we live differently? Jesus himself is baptized by John. In doing so, Jesus affirms that this

is a beginning point for the human being longing to turn towards God. By joining us in our own baptisms he simultaneously offers himself as the pathway.

The wonderful thing about baptism is that it is an entrance into a worshipping community. When someone is baptized the assembly's congregation is asked: "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in their life in Christ?" Throughout our lives, as we turn and return, we are given strength by God's presence, certainly, but also by those sitting beside us in these pews.

This mind-changing that Jesus exhorts us to undertake is not always a simple process. Or it *is* simple, just difficult to follow through with! I don't think it is a matter of making a list of pros and cons, of weighing the outcome of a decision. When we are sent into the vineyard, when we are led out of our tents and shown the stars, what will we do? The first step is to believe that God is real, that God is present. Before someone becomes a postulant for holy orders, but has entered into a focused discernment process, one is sometimes called an aspirant. To aspire is literally to be breathed upon. Remember when Jesus breathes on the disciples?

In my own process towards holy orders I never experienced clear directives or saw skywriting. (If I had it would have been along the lines of "Surrender, Dorothy!") However, one Sunday in my home parish we blessed an icon during the service. It was an icon depicting Jesus as Emmanuel: God with us. I was sitting nearby in the choir and the priest asked me to hold the icon. While I held it, I had the sensation that the icon was vibrating—or perhaps it was I who was trembling. It was a profound moment for me that I cannot adequately describe. I told the writer of the icon, who was a friend, what had seemed to happen to me. She allowed me to take the icon home for a few days. For several days I had this icon as the main focal point in my living room. The message, the choice, was not about this or that path or decision. It was about the reality of God's *presence*: with me, with all of us. I was being asked to trust, to believe, *no matter what*. I was taken out of my tent and shown the stars. Could I count them? Did that matter?

One commentary I read pointed out that there are two sons in Jesus' parable. The conclusion the writer came to is that in the first instance *both* are loved. Perhaps the next day, when given another task, their roles will be reversed. Renewing trust and belief, allowing our minds to be changed, is a daily process. Isaiah has the beautiful lines: "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." (Isaiah 30:15) "God promises that our failure will not nullify or revoke the divine purpose; but we have to trust. God promises to take on our failures, but that is not the end. God shows us a path in the desert, a road to a love that is willing to die to show us that God's love is the only true reality for which we were made." (Br. Sean Glenn, SSJE)

Suffrages A includes these lines: "Clothe your ministers with righteousness; let your people sing with joy." (BCP p. 97) Today can we allow God to do this for us, so that we can become who we are meant to be? What God asks of us is simple: "Come work alongside me in the vineyard." Yet responding with a, "Yes!" will have profound consequences. Even more wonderfully, if we say, "No," at first, God gives us the chance to change our minds, to begin again.

Julian of Norwich said: "Marvelous and solemn is the place where the Protector dwells, bringing all into Oneness. This is why God wants us to quickly respond whenever we feel the Divine touch, rejoicing more in the wholeness of God's love than we sorrow over our frequent failures. For of all our actions, God finds the most worth in lives lived with gladness and laughter, even in the midst of our penance." (Julian of Norwich, *All Shall Be Well*, p. 312)