

GOD'S WORD

Prayer for Illumination

Ezekiel 18:1-9

18The word of the LORD came to me: ²What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? ³As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die. ⁵If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right— ⁶if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor’s wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period, ⁷does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, ⁸does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, ⁹follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully—*such a one is righteous*; he shall surely live, says the Lord GOD.

Matthew 21:23-32

²³When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” ²⁴Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” ²⁷So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For 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.

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Sermon -The Way of the Righteous

Sept 27, 2020

Ezekiel 18:1-9, Matthew 21:23-32

Words change over time. Some words change their meanings entirely, while others develop associations that taint an earlier meaning. Religious words in particular get attached to those who are using those words either in thoughtful or pejorative ways. *Religion* itself has become a distrusted word. It's far easier in today's context to say that one is "spiritual but not religious" than to claim to be "religious" but not all that spiritual. Those who are religious are not simply noted as practitioners of a religion; the word religious these days tends to connote dogmatism, rigidity, or obsession with a practice or a rule. The same can be said of the word evangelist or evangelical. Once thought to be anyone who proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ, now it is associated with a particular brand of Christianity that tends to align its message with right-wing ideology - or at the very worst expressions of it - with white supremacy. It can be dismissive to call someone an evangelical, just like the word fundamentalist was bandied about in the last century to denote those with a rigid Christian point of view. Then, for those who tend to fall on the progressive side of the aisle, at times they have been called apostate or heretical for their use of language and either dismissed from certain fellowships or denied leadership roles like ordination. Words have power. Or as John Tuft, a former pastor of mine turned writer says: *Words are magic and writers are wizards.*

I'm sure that I don't have to tell you that there are plenty of wizards wielding both good and bad magic out there. You know the worst of the slurs in our increasingly polarized culture, so I won't repeat them here. Rather I would have us work on redeeming some religious language

as a method of working toward healing the divide. I probably can't save all the words, but today I want to expressly look at reconsidering the word "righteous." The biblical nature of that word says a lot – and we have dismissed it as meaning something more like smugly self-righteous – which is a whole different thing.

I would like to someday be called "righteous" in the biblical sense of the word. We looked at its meaning in last week's adult Sunday School class – because in Hebrew – the word *tzedakah* encompasses a very broad meaning that in English comes across as "righteous." In Hebrew often *mishpat* and *tzedakah* are often paired together and translated as justice and righteousness. Both are about how we live together in community. One is about holding each other to standards of justice so that all are treated fairly, and those who do something harmful to the community are called to account. The other that is translated as righteousness is about how means are distributed within the community. How do we deeply and truly care for each other and make sure there is enough for everyone? Do that well, and earn the adjective "righteous."

Today's passage from Matthew reminds us that, even then, the way of the righteous was often misunderstood by those in power. Again, I am working from scholar Warren Carter's understanding of this gospel as a push/pull between those who are part of the Empire, and those whom Jesus is walking with on the margins. Jesus' authority to teach and preach is being questioned by the chief priests and elders the temple. It's the same old, same old. They don't like the people he associates with. They want him to submit to the expectations of the institution and acquiesce to their leadership instead of following his own path and inner direction. So, Jesus again goes into teaching mode with a parable of two sons. Which son does the will of the father, the one who says he will help in the field and doesn't, or the one who says he won't but then does? The answer is easy – it's the one who does the work.

The ones who do the work – who are generous, and compassionate, and actually know and care about their neighbors are the ones who do the will of the father, therefore, the ones who act in God’s stead. In this case, Jesus makes it clear – for those in the back – that these tax collectors, and prostitutes, and other no-good types he hangs out with will know and enter into the Kingdom of God well before the elites. They understand the benefit of being accepted, and with grace learn how to offer generosity to one another. The righteous see and honor the dignity in each person.

That was John’s way. John the Baptist came preaching repentance, grace, and God’s love. He was leading others in the way of righteousness, and those on the margins took to it like the thirsty to a clear mountain stream. Jesus himself found the camel-hair coat, locust eating prophet compelling and shared his vision of the Kingdom of God as a place of forgiveness and belonging. Together, they spread this good news to the far corners of society, in places where acceptance of their ideas flourished, even as their popularity began to get them into trouble.

What I don’t want to do in this message though is to point at Jesus’ ideas as so radically new and different that we don’t know where they came from. We do know where Jesus got his understanding. It was from reading and knowing the scripture that came before his journey into leading God’s people. He was familiar with the Torah – and God’s deliverance from Egypt. He knew the Psalms by heart – so he could pray deeply. And for today’s thoughts, I remind you that he knew the prophets and how God put words in their mouths to speak the uncomfortable truth to power.

One of those prophets, Ezekiel, has some strange visions in it. We don’t read from it often – but the suggested reading for today and its surrounding text is an understanding of what it means to be righteous, so I thought I would include it. If a man is righteous... and does what is

lawful and right... then he shall surely live. This idea of living – means living without condemnation for wrongdoing. It goes along with both John's and Jesus' preaching about repentance, forgiveness, and God's mercy. No longer will children pay for their parents' sin – each person is responsible for his (or her) own commitment to righteous living.

I find it fascinating what's included in the Ezekiel list as well. Perhaps we should pay attention to these kinds of lists when they appear in scripture about right living. Some things we may find odd or outdated, but others seem to really stand the test of time. Don't eat on the mountain or look up to idols – why? This seems strange, but I suspect this is a reminder that we can love the God of the universe fully and completely or we can turn our consumption and idolization to such minor gods that we greedily look for material blessings rather than spiritual ones. Don't defile your neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period. Again, we wonder about this advice, the second part especially. And yet, I'm actually pleasantly surprised to see in what is supposed to be considered the patriarchal Old Testament – a genuine principle of respect for women and their bodies. Living righteously is always about seeking right relationships, which also means right sexual relationships. It may not be exactly how we would frame a conversation about consent, but it's a good start. The righteous value the dignity of the other person. No oppression. Pay the debts you owe. Don't steal. Give what extra you have to the poor. Don't charge excessive interest. Don't be unfair. Settle disputes wisely and justly. And keep the ordinances and statutes of the Lord. In other words, in grief or in celebration find direction and consolation in God – always. Then you can be considered righteous.

The way of the righteous. I suspect that each of us might have our own list or definition for what constitutes a righteous life. And that list or definition is frequently based on what we have learned from being part of a religion. I'll work just a moment on reclaiming that word too,

because it's an important one. We follow moral guidelines in part, because of our religious upbringing or study later in life. There's nothing wrong or inherently dogmatic or problematic about that. It can become a spiritual journey, or it can spring from our desire for practicality and kindness. We do right by others because we want others to do right by us. That is almost always a part of any religion to make right relationships a priority.

So, as homework, I encourage you to take some time today to think about your list. If a person is righteous and does what is lawful and right... If one follows the way of righteousness... then, then what? What goes into your list or definition of the way of the righteous? Is it kindness, generosity, compassion? What about having a heart for the tax collectors and prostitutes, or the drug dealers and weekend strippers? What do we learn from a person who embodies grace and forgiveness? Who do you think of as the righteous among us? How do you want to change your own life to become more a part of God's beloved righteous ones?

Too often those who are labeled as religious or righteous are called that for being hypocritical or way too uptight in their dogmatic approach to life. Let's be reminded today that those who are *religious* are those who take their faith history seriously, who honor tradition, and care about sharing God's love through a long-standing conversation about who God is and how God operates. Let's be reminded that the *righteous* are called so because they care not only about themselves and their own reputation, but because they are deeply concerned with every one of God's beloved children having enough. Just saying those two words might have a mighty impact. *Words are magic, and writers are wizards* – and in particular, sacred words are able to weave such magic into the world that can soften our hearts, enlighten our minds, and magnify the greatest truths. May it be so. Amen.