

6 Epiphany A 2017

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

Who is always right?

Who is righteous?

Do you need to be right to be righteous?

Does being righteous make you right?

Is it more important to be right, right now,
Or righteous?

We have entered a time
When we no longer simply disagree
With those who hold other points of views,
Affirm other values,
Recommend different courses of action.

We move straight through disagreement
And on to condemnation,
And the conviction that the other
Is not only wrong,
But willfully misguided
And deliberately seeking to do harm.

In these times,
Can anyone be right?
Is it even right to be right?
Can anyone be righteous?
What does it mean,
To be righteous now?

Happy are they,
We hear in this morning's psalm,
Happy are they
Who never do anything wrong.

Do you know any of those people?

The psalms,
In my experience,
Are not notable for irony.

So if you caught these words
In this morning's psalm,
And wondered if the writer could possibly be serious,
I think the answer is yes.

The psalmist,
And those who first sang the psalms,
Believed that it was possible
To keep the law –
The precious gift of God,
The gift that assured righteousness,
right relationship with God –
They believed it was possible to keep the law
Fully and completely,
And thus be blameless,
And never do any wrong.

There is no irony here.

But the gospel is another story.

Jesus is an ironic, attention-grabbing,
Storytelling prophet and preacher,
And when he tells us to pluck out our eyes
And cut off our hands
Rather than risk sin,
When he tells us that not only our actions,
But our words and even our thoughts
Can separate us from God,
He does get our full attention.

So now he has our attention.
What are we supposed to do with his words?

At moments like this,
I often wish we were at a seminar table,
Or in a living room,
Engaging in the faithful work
Of reading scripture critically.
Then we could at least
Wrap our minds around this off-putting
And unappealing gospel passage.

If only we were.
Then we could remember together

That Jesus is an ironic, imaginative speaker
Who uses startling figures of speech.
He didn't, for instance,
really think camels could go through a needle's eye.

We could talk about how Jesus uses words,
And how the Bible is put together.
We could talk about this particular passage
In the context of the larger portion of the gospel
From which it is taken,
The Sermon on the Mount,
And we could remind each other that the entire so-called sermon,
A compilation of the teachings of Jesus
As remembered and later recorded and shaped by his disciples,
The entire sermon is carefully crafted
To show us Jesus
As a new Moses, giving a new law,
Proclaiming a greater, more demanding righteousness
Than that of Torah.

This Jesus proclaims a new law
That guides and governs
Not only behavior,
But will and intention,
A law to be written on the heart.

We could remember that Jesus was often focused
On the emptiness of practice
For its own sake,
The harmfulness of practice
That takes no thought
For the greater claims of justice and mercy,
And we could affirm
That his passion was to live in absolute union
With the God who is the source of life.
Jesus' gift to us was to offer
the same life-giving communion.

His greater righteousness
Is about a life formed more and more
In the image and likeness
Of the God with whom he was in ongoing,
Abiding relationship.

That would be one conversation.
There are plenty of others,

If we were letting our minds roam
Over this difficult gospel.

If this were a conversation
Focused on the authority of scripture,
Then we could reflect on the church's ongoing struggle
To remain in faithful dialogue
With difficult words like these.

Murder. Debt. Adultery. Oath-making and Oath-breaking.
And divorce.
In this gospel passage,
Jesus prohibits divorce.
Where do we go with that?

Generations ago now,
Our church made a radical change.
In changing times,
Acknowledging a changed understanding of human development
And gender roles,
Affirming the respect and safety due to all women and children,
and the changing law of the societies in which we live,
bringing reason to bear on scripture and tradition,
Our church, among others,
confronted one of the undisputed teachings of Jesus,
His prohibition of divorce,
And decided that it could no longer uphold it.
Despite what Jesus said in an earlier time –
What he said for the protection of women and children –
Our church says now
That there are times when divorce
Is the most faithful and life-giving option.

We changed.
We believed,
And continue to believe,
That we upheld
The greater righteousness.
We even think we were right.

And now here we are,
Gathered in this church,
In a time when everything is uncertain
And polarized –
A time when we hope the law
Will be strong enough to hold us

In the way of justice –
We are here in this time and place
To hold our understanding of the words,
Our understanding of the times,
And then, in a moment out of time,
To offer ourselves in worship,
A great act of thanksgiving
In which we open ourselves up
To the transforming power
Of word and sacrament.

Our claim,
Startling and scary on days like today,
Is that the words of scripture,
Whatever they say,
When they are read by the faithful gathered in community
give life.

It's easy to claim that scripture gives life
When the images and promises
Speak to our deep longings
For meaning, connection, peace.
Remember last week?
Jesus told us we were the salt of the earth
And the light of the world.
Now today,
It seems
He's telling us to cut ourselves in pieces.

It's hard on a day like today,
To make the claim that the words of scripture offer life.

Our ancestors in the faith
Knew that living by the law,
The precious gift of God,
Promised life.
The greatest of their teachers told them,
In choosing to live this way,
You choose life.
Choose life,
Says Moses to the people,
As they prepare to enter a new country
And start a new way of life,
Choose life,
So that you and your children may live.

That was their faith.

Faith is not a feeling,
But a way of living in the world.
Faith is lived out not only in action,
But in the gradual shaping of our hearts and minds
So that they are more and more
Like the heart and mind of Jesus,
The one whose heart was God's heart,
And whose mind was God's mind.

How could God's heart and mind
Do anything but what is right,
And just, and loving?

That's the way Jesus lived.
In union with the heart and mind of God,
Open to that transforming power.
That's the life he offers us.

When we accept that gift,
As he did,
We will be changed,
And become what we receive.

We are afraid, many of us,
Of this kind of talk.

We know that as we are,
we cannot even come close
To the greater righteousness
That reflects the righteousness of God.
And if we cannot even come close,
Should we try at all?

Do we need to cut off a piece of ourselves
To show we're trying?
And if we try and fail,
Is all lost?

We are afraid of gospel passages like this one,
Because we cannot imagine
Taking these words literally,
And we do not believe, secretly, we have permission
To understand them any other way.

So we label them moralistic,
And walk away.

We are so afraid of being labeled moralistic ourselves
That we forget that there is such a thing
As a moral life.

Now, in this time of deep divides
And raw feelings,
Do we know how to be righteous?
Are we willing to be righteous,
Instead of insisting we are right?

Jesus keeps offering us,
Not a way to feel,
But a way to live.
There is no one recipe for this righteousness.
It comes from relationship.
It looks different now
Than it did in the time of Jesus,
And it looks different now
Than it did last summer,
Or last week.
But righteousness endures;
The tuning of the heart and mind to God
Is still the way of choosing life.

There is a greater righteousness
For us, in this time.
It may not look for us
The way it looks
In this attention-grabbing,
Uncomfortable gospel.

But now is the time to wonder:

What does righteousness look like for me?
For all of us together, in community?

We no longer believe it is possible to do no wrong.
But let's not forget that we are still called
Not so much to be right,
As to do right,
To choose life,
to walk in the way of the one
who is life.