

6 Epiphany A 2020

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

Happy are those
Who never do any wrong.

Do you know anyone like that?
Who is always right?
Who is truly righteous?

In times like this,
It sometimes seems
That it is like rubbing salt in a wound
Even to speak of righteousness,
Of doing right,
Of being right.

We live in a time when those in power
Claim, apparently without a trace of irony or self-reflection
That what they do is right,
Because they are the ones who do it.
That their actions are,
At least in one notable case,
Perfect.

Happy are those
Who never do anything wrong.
Is the psalmist talking about people
Who believe their power makes them right,
Or people who believe that righteousness
Is the same a good behavior?

No –
It is both simpler
And more complex than that.

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.

The gospel tells another story.
Jesus, in his preaching,
In this morning's difficult and uncomfortable,
Unappealing gospel passage,
Tells us we cannot be blameless
Even if we keep the commandments.
And that,
Believe it or not,
Is good news.
Shocking.
But good.

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?

We can start by moving beyond the shock,
And ask ourselves,
Not, what is the new recipe for getting it right,
Achieving a greater, more demanding righteousness
Than that of Torah,
But rather,
How am I set free
By confessing
That I will never get it all right?
How can I find a right, life-giving relationship with God,
Not by succeeding on my own,
But by asking for help,
And accepting the gift with thanks?

Jesus invites us to let go
The crippling falsehood
That practice will make us perfect.
He invites us to move into a righteousness
That is not about getting it right,
But about relationship.

Jesus' 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.

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?

Maybe we could learn to see that with this list of cautions,
Based in the ancient law of his people,
Jesus seeks to give us,
Not so much a recipe for a righteousness
That is clearly unattainable,
As to hold up a mirror
By which we could see ourselves
In all our splendid frailty,
And lead us to a humility
That could be the beginning of a new relationship
With the righteousness of God.

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 at the beginning of the year.
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.

We no longer believe it is possible to do no wrong.
But let's not forget that we are still called
To do right,
And to walk with God.

But so what?

Without love,

Even righteousness is worth nothing –
And being right,
Without love,
Can do more harm than good.

So rather than focusing on righteousness,
Perhaps we could think about love.
Because God is the essence of love,
Walking in the way of God,
Is walking in the way of love.
And that way is open to all.

No matter who you are,
No matter what brought you here,
The way of love is for you.
It is bigger than today's gospel.

Maybe you came here this morning
Wondering how to make a good life better,
And this difficult gospel
Speaks a word of truth to you.

But what if you came here this morning
confused,
Frightened, lonely,
Even in anguish?
What if you came here this morning
Knowing that
Unlike the happy ones of the psalm,
You had in fact done wrong,
Perhaps a wrong that could not be put right?

What if you came here this morning
Concerned not with righteousness,
But with survival?

Then where is the good news?

Beyond the words of scripture,
Deeper than the words and actions of liturgy,
There is a power and a love
That keep this broken and beautiful world spinning
And hold us grounded within it.

We cannot explain it
Or control it,
But we can reach for it.

It will not keep us safe,
Or take our pain away,
But it will offer meaning,
And freedom, and peace.

This, at least, is my experience.

Outside and around and through this gospel,
Or any of the lessons
We heard this morning,
We can hear the words of life,
Words that offer a vision broader
Than we can create,
Deeper than we can go.

There is life speaking through the words,
Hope in the story.

We can hear life
In the story we tell in the Eucharistic prayer.

We can find life

In the community that listens for us
When we can hear nothing
And have no hope.

There is a great story
Beyond and shining through this difficult
And uncomfortable,
Even comfortless gospel.

It is the story of the power of love.

Love that springs up out of nothing,
and renews itself continually
And cannot be hidden or undone
Or killed.

A love that makes its home in us,
That will never shrink back
From our pain, our fear,
Our despair.

A love that gives us courage,
And endurance, and hope.

That love will come and find us,
Wherever we are,
And remain with us
Until we are ready to get up
And continue,
Until we are ready to enter again into the story
Of love in the world.

Whatever you brought with you to this place today,
That story is yours to claim,
And so choose life.