

RECLAIMING FULLNESS OF LIFE

MICAH 6:6-8

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THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story about a fire that destroyed a textile company near Lawrence, Massachusetts a few years ago. The event drew national attention. By the time firefighters got things under control the plant was gone. No one was injured but the psychological and economic impact were tremendous.

Not only were the employees of the company faced with the prospect of no jobs two weeks before Christmas, but everyone thought the owner Aaron Feuerstein – grandson of the founder – would take advantage of the disaster to move his company to a southern state where lower wages were the norm. The entire community was faced with the possibility of losing its largest employer.

But that did not happen. The day after the fire Mr. Feuerstein announced that all 3,000 people on his payroll would receive their salaries for the next three months even though there would be no work for them to do. He said he would rebuild the plant on its site. “I have a responsibility to the workers and to this community,” he said. “It would be unconscionable to put three thousand people on the streets and deliver a death blow to the city of Lawrence. Perhaps my company is worth less to Wall Street, but I can tell you it is worth far more to all of us.”ⁱ

What makes someone like Aaron Feuerstein act so decently, putting the welfare of others ahead of his own financial self-interest? I note that Feuerstein is a devout Jew. He prays daily and reads the Bible and Talmud regularly. I know there are other people of faith who pray and study Scripture regularly, yet act with far less nobility and kindness. But I believe Aaron Feuerstein is an example of what the Bible means by “righteous.”

Like the word repentance we talked about last week, righteousness is not a word with which we have good associations. When I hear the term I think either self-righteous or righteous-indignation. Persons afflicted with either of these are probably not high on your list to invite to your next garden party. But in fact what I want to explore with you today is, as Micah says, that a righteous person is one who acts with justice, loves kindness and walks with humility.

We are in the last week of a sermon series on sin – the lost language of salvation. We have come full circle. When we started these sermons we said this lost language, these antiquated terms actually have contemporary relevance. We said sin is the only language that describes the condition of our souls. We said repentance means to turn around, to repair the damage we have done to ourselves and others and embrace life. Today I’d like to consider with you how being righteous helps us reclaim fullness of life.

The Hebrew root for the word righteous – *sadiq* – means justice. The Greek or Christian root, a word Paul uses over sixty times in his letters – *dike* – sometimes implies “faithfulness to” and sometimes “the doing of good works for” our relationship to God and our neighbor.ⁱⁱ

To put this another way, I remember a mentor many years ago who used to say that righteousness means simply “right relationship.” This is the blessing of shalom. Right relationship to God, to neighbor, to self, to creation. Not just peace but fullness of life.

Each of our relationships in life – to spouse, children, employer, colleagues, and neighbor – have specific demands. There is no meaning for righteousness outside our relationships. To the extent that you and I live into and up to the expectations of our relationships we are righteous.ⁱⁱⁱ Let me offer a few illustrations.

First, if sin is missing the mark, righteousness is hitting the mark. Literally, one of the Hebrew words for righteousness is “one whose aim is true.” I like this understanding of righteousness because it suggests that we can improve our aim. Daily practice makes a difference. The arrow of my efforts to meet the demands, to nurture and hold accountable my relationships improves the more I practice.^{iv}

Let me give you an example. We are striving as a staff at Westminster to nurture and build the kind of community we need to support one another and to serve this congregation. As we are developing goals for the coming year I included among mine the goal of “deepening” my relationship with each staff member. Someone asked, “how will you know when that has happened?” As I thought about it, I realized what I want is more intimacy, more trust, more ease of disclosure regarding difficult issues, and the invitation for mutual feedback and criticism.

But the trick is not to equate righteousness with merely our efforts but with the larger goal of creating right relationships in our lives. I can say I want a better relationship with my child and I can go to every soccer game my child plays but merely showing up at the soccer games may or may not improve our relationship. Maybe I go to the games but don’t give of myself. Maybe attending the games is just something I check off on my list of things to do as a responsible parent. Maybe what I need to do is find ways to participate in the life of my child – sharing my life, my joys and struggles, trying to put myself in my child’s shoes, listening to him or her at the end of a school day. Working to identify his or her feelings if there was rejection by a coach or satisfaction reaching a milestone in class.

You can see how Christians have fallen into the trap of thinking that if I read my Bible, go to church and send my kids to Sunday School, if I serve on a committee and make a pledge and so on then I can consider myself a righteous person.

The Pharisees fell into this trap. They focussed more on good works, on carrying out the letter instead of the spirit of the law. More on the means than the end to which their good works and the law were aimed. Righteousness then becomes hollow and superficial.

But real righteousness results when the point of your good works, like the arrows of a Cupid not just of eros but agape and philia, hit their mark and create stronger relationships. I-Thou relationships. Fullness of life.

Secondly, taking off on the image of an arrow hitting the mark, one preacher says righteousness is like wielding a big sewing needle with sturdy brown thread, stitching together the places of this world that are ripped apart.

Our job is to hunt the places where the world is torn open, bend over the damage and do what we can.^v

We are on God's sewing team. Every good deed, every kind word, every act of justice and compassion tugs the torn edges closer together – not just the daily relationships where you live but also the larger and more distant relationships we sometimes forget about or feel helpless to affect. The plight of unemployed young African-American males, the plight of a planet subject to warming and pollution. Every kind act, every work of justice tugs some torn piece of a person or group or Mother Earth closer together.

But the mending does not end there.

It is by mending, says one preacher that we continue, in God's holy design, to be mended ourselves. The other night visiting Carol's father in his hospital room we got to chatting with his roommate. An interesting man who was ready to talk. I looked across the room, asked how he was, and soon we were into a conversation.

I noticed he had had one leg amputated. He told us about his children and his grandchildren, about his career as a tool and die maker, his investments and some free tax advice. Finally he reached in his drawer and pulled out one of those little metal ring puzzles, tossed it over to me and when I gave up Carol tried her turn.

Carol's dad – a mechanical engineer who knows something about tool and die making – jumped in the conversation. We discovered, as anyone in Buffalo does who talks for more than five minutes, people we knew in common. A nurse appeared and said she was ready to give our new friend a shower – something hospital patients don't usually pass up. But he said, "not now, I need more time to talk with my friends." The nurse left. Henry shared with us that he was scheduled for more surgery the next morning. We winced. We talked some more. It was like God was stitching all of us together with the sturdy brown thread of his Spirit. Somehow, I am not sure how, we were pulled closer to one another. I can tell you after a long day and a long week some parts of me were a little tattered. But in the reaching out I felt as if some holy surgeon of the soul had stitched those tattered parts of me back together. We held hands in a circle and prayed. I left feeling whole and right. Mending relationships is how we continue to be mended. Deep healing is a sign of righteousness and fullness of life.

Lastly, the pursuit of righteousness brings fullness of life to the community. Today's reading from Micah opens with a question: "What does the Lord require of you and me?" in other words, how do we become righteous people?

The prophet wonders, "shall I bring burnt offerings, calves a year old, precious oil, the fruit of my body?" No, he concludes, what God requires is not the motions of righteousness but the actions of a righteous heart: justice, kindness, humility.

It is often assumed that if you care about character, you don't care about the big social/political issues, and if you care about large scale social/political change you must regard questions of personal virtue as a minor matter. This simplistic distinction would have been meaningless to Micah.^{vi}

Micah's judgement against Israel was inseparable from his judgement against the daily choices being made by individual Israelites. For Micah the system could not work if righteousness had been thrown to the ground. We do not always see the connection between individual actions and the common good but the Bible says be not deceived – the well being of creation depends on the rightness of the choices you make as an individual.

From the couples figure skating debacle at the Winter Olympics to the Enron/Arthur Andersen charade to the decision of a Kansas school board to overturn the efforts of a high school teacher to deal severely with plagiarism in her sophomore class – when we ignore righteousness ultimately everyone loses something. But pursuing righteousness ultimately makes everyone a winner. Righteousness means fullness of life for the community.

Here it is annual meeting Sunday. In a moment we will baptize Kim and Aimee. We will receive new members into the life and fellowship of this congregation.

You see the life of a congregation is all about relationships. Our relationship to God, our relationship to one another, our relationship to the visitor who comes through our doors and our relationship to this region and planet we seek to serve.

As we practice and pursue righteousness, as our aim improves, as we mend the world and receive mending in the process, God's will becomes our will, God's perspective our perspective, God's voice heard above the clamor of the world.

Jesus said to his disciples “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.” The scribes and Pharisees, you see, were playing it by the Book. They didn't slip up on a single do or don't. But they were getting it all wrong.

Righteousness is getting it all right, says Fred Buechner. If you play it the way it's supposed to be played, there shouldn't be a still foot in the house.^{vii}

I'll bet there weren't many still feet in Lawrence, Massachusetts a few years ago when Aaron Feuerstein announced he would rebuild his textile plant right there where the old one used to stand.

Wouldn't it be fun to be that kind of person?

Wouldn't it be fun to be that kind of church and get a few feet taping and maybe, just maybe, get this old town dancing again? Amen.

Endnotes:

ⁱ Harold Kushner, Living a Life That Matters: Resolving the Conflict Between Conscience and Success (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2001) 86.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Speaking of Sin (Cambridge: Cowley Press, 2000) 98.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) 80.

^{iv} Taylor, 101.

^v Taylor, 102.

^{vi} The Christian Century, February 27 – March 6, 2002, “Common Character,” 5.

^{vii} Fred Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 82.