

Righteous

Pentecost 6, Year C,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

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Psalm 15 NIV / Luke 10:38-42 NIV

Righteous. When we hear that word, what do we think of?

Do we think of following some strict moral code,
something we can aspire to but just never reach?

Or maybe we think of someone who is good and upstanding,
a “righteous” man or woman?

Perhaps our cultural vernacular comes to mind
and we think of something generally very favorable, “that’s righteous dude!”

From all these conceptions, there’s a sense of something or someone that is ideal,
that is a goal that we strive for.

Righteous is a positive notion; we never imagine righteous in a negative sense.

The Psalmist has a lot to say about righteousness in our reading this morning.

There’s a lot packed in such a short reading.

The first thing I’d like us to consider is why righteousness is important.

The passage opens with a discussion of what is required
to enter worship with the Almighty.

The entire psalm is set up at the beginning
as a consideration of what one needs to do to be in the presence of God,
which in itself is something worth noting.

When we step into worship in community, God is present.

God is not remote, God is here with us.

The Israelites in their trials and travels worshipped in a variety of settings,

but after the events and covenant at Mt. Sinai,

]there was always a set-apart place

where they could prepare for and enter into the presence of the Divine.

And it wasn't always exactly the same.

As they wandered in the desert,

that place was a tent that contained the Ark of the Covenant.

Once they became settled, the tent was replaced with a grand temple.

And after the destruction of the final version of that temple by the Romans,

and the diaspora of Jews to the ends of the earth,

that place became the synagogue, the living room,

or wherever a group of them could gather.

The setting wasn't as important

as the intentions and the preparation of the gathered community.

Which brings us to the next theme to examine.

What is righteousness and what does it mean to be righteous?

I think too often we get so hung up on the specifics

that we miss the bigger picture.

When we think of the context of the audience for whom the Psalms were written,

we get some perspective on what the writer is getting at in today's reading.

They had the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, as their guide.

These books gave very detailed instructions

to guide every aspect of their lives, 613 of them to be exact.

These were people who stressed constantly

to achieve the perfection these laws expected,

in order to be “clean,”

to be able to enter the Temple

and join with the community in worship.

How many of those ancient Jews were successful with that do you think?

Probably about the same number of us

who have led, pure and unblemished lives.

Trying to meet such an unreachable goal

left them despondent and defeated,

and often they would just chuck it all together

and join one of the pagan religions around them.

When you read the Old Testament, particularly Kings and Samuel,

it seems like every time God blinked,

they were putting poles up in high places and worshipping idols.

I guess the benefit was it kept the prophets in business

and gave them work on a regular basis.

So in Psalm 15, the writer pares it down to some basic themes.

The answer the psalmist provides parallels the Ten Commandments,

especially the sixth through the tenth.

Have you practiced justice and compassion toward your neighbor and community?

These verses teach that worship requires an authentic commitment

to social and personal justice.

It has everything to do with integrity.

It has everything to do with walking the talk,
with living out the truths you claim to embrace, to walk blamelessly.

The call is to do righteously by speaking the truth and not slander,
keeping your commitments and using your resources with equity and integrity.

The focus is on how we live our lives,

individually in private, and publicly in community, in relation to each other.

Do our actions reflect our faith?

To quote one of those aforementioned prophets Micah,

do we act justly, show mercy, and walk humbly?

Do we mean what we say and honor our commitments?

Do we put our faith in God or in money?

We are the living body of Christ in the world.

Does our behavior and our work reflect that?

And how do we talk about others?

Do we always lift others up,

or does slander find it's way into our speech?

Every area of our daily living should reflect the values we uphold.

How we talk to others, how we honor agreements we've made,
even how we use our resources.

When we shop, or invest,

we need to think about how and where we spend our money.

Are we buying coffee that is acquired at a price

that allows a living income for the farmer who grew it?

Does the shop we buy our crafts from
or the restaurant we buy our chicken in
promote fair and equitable treatment for all,
or just for some?

Does the hummus we buy support the oppression of others?

In today's psalm, for every positive trait we are to exhibit,
there is a corresponding negative one to avoid.

Slander, greed, untrustworthiness are traits to avoid,
as are the people who espouse such characteristics.

This is where the rubber meets the road.

It's a choice between God's values and the values of this world.

And therein lies the struggle as well.

We are born of this world and part of this culture.

We are beset by the same timeless conflict
that has been around since these texts were written.

Do we "fit in" with the culture at large and embrace that which the world values,
or do we set ourselves apart,

risking being ostracized and excluded
for embracing that which God values
and that which Jesus preached so passionately about?

Our text this morning would lead us to believe we should avoid or exclude those
who are lost in those traits that exemplify the sin of this world.

However ours is also a God of forgiveness, and grace
that we humans cannot put limits on.

Yet we can “despise” the vile acts of those who are lost.

Like our choices in how we spend our resources,
we have a choice not to support those
who promote values in opposition to God's values,
to speak out against those acts that fly in the face
of all that Jesus taught in his ministry on Earth.

Those same sins of greed and malice, falsehood and slander,
and lack of integrity that this psalm addresses.

Particularly to those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ, we have a duty,
as pointed out in Matthew 18, to seek to redeem our stray siblings behavior,
which implies saying something and not being quiet.

And whether within our own church family, or in the greater culture,
who we support and who we see straying
should be a reflection of the values of God we are called to emulate.

Looking the other way is not an option,
yet judgment and not grace is not an option either.

After all, none of us walks through this life pristine.

We all stumble and stray at times.

It's not an easy walk for sure.

I'd like to share [a video clip](#) this morning from the movie *Pay It Forward*.

In this clip, Helen Hunt's character
searches out her mother at a homeless encampment.

She has not been a good mother, but has been an addict
whose neglectful behavior

led to abuse and mistreatment by the many boyfriends she had.
Her behavior would lead anyone to feel resentment and negativity.

Yet Helen Hunt's character shows what it means to reflect God's values,
without sacrificing her own integrity.

SLIDE

What righteousness boils down to is integrity.

It's leading a life that reflects the values of God reflected in the Torah,
the writings of the prophets and the songs of the psalmist,
and summarized by the savior, Jesus Christ.

We have the choice to keep plugging along,

following God unless it's too inconvenient or risky,
then switching to Caesar's way.

One way grants access to the sanctuary, one way leads to standing outside the door.

Which choice will you make? Amen.