

June 26, 2011  
Second Sunday After Pentecost  
Romans 6:12-23

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### *God's Positioning System*

For the past six weeks I have been haunted by the word “righteousness;” the reason will become clear shortly. It’s not a warm, fuzzy word by any means but it is one we hear a lot, especially from Paul. A friend of mine recently said, “I hate that word! Write a sermon about it.” Why, one might wonder, would anyone want to hear a sermon about something he or she abhors? The answer is that my friend senses correctly that righteousness, so frequently mentioned in the Bible, is a buzzword of Christianity. When I saw the lectionary readings for today, I decided it was fate of some sort that I tackle this topic this morning. So we’ll have a go at it and if you start falling asleep, I’ll clap my hands to wake you.

Where, oh, where, is William of Ockham? He was an English Franciscan friar and scholastic philosopher, from the village of Ockham in Surrey, England. He lived in the latter part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup>. His approach to intellectual discourse and philosophic debate mandated that questions and inquiries at hand be stated as simply as possible. This principle is called Occam’s razor because extraneous concerns — as interesting as they may be — get “shaved off” and the focus of a problem revealed. He stated: “For nothing ought to be posited without a reason given, unless it is self-evident (literally, known through itself) or known by experience or proved by the authority of Sacred Scripture.”

From the start let’s make it clear that what Paul had in mind when he said “Righteous” is pretty much the opposite of what we assume the meaning to be today. Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines righteousness as: “acting in accord with divine or moral law: free from guilt or sin 2 a morally right or justifiable act b arising from an outraged sense of justice or morality, as in indignation.”

When we hear the word “righteous” most of us hear an implied “self” preceding it. The implication being that someone who is righteous is the first to let you know it. It seems hard to be righteous without being self-righteous.

Please try to forget this meaning this morning. Because what Paul and most of the writers of scripture had in mind is very different, indeed.

Here is Frederick Buechner’s definition of Righteousness:

“ You haven’t got it *right!*” says the exasperated piano teacher. Junior is holding his hands the way he’s been told. His fingering is unexceptionable. He has memorized the piece perfectly. He has hit all the proper notes with deadly accuracy. But his heart’s not in it, only his fingers. What he’s playing is a sort of music but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping. He has succeeded in boring everybody to death including himself.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 5:20) The scribes and Pharisees 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*. If you play it the way it’s supposed to be played, there shouldn’t be a still foot in the house.” (*Wishful Thinking*. 82)

Paul was preaching to people who were playing by the rules, ancient laws that governed every aspect of their lives. These were people who were endeavoring to gain God’s acceptance and grace through their actions and deeds. They believed God would reward them if they behaved properly and faithfully. To be “righteous” in their eyes was to be morally upstanding, to play every note perfectly. And Paul is saying in effect, “No, you’ve got it all wrong when you get it all right.” What he is trying to convey is that they are picked up and set on the right path not by anything they do or do not do, but only by their recognition of the grace of God.

In doctrinal language this is called justification by faith. Again we have to let go our current understandings of the word. When we hear “justify,” we are apt to think of someone who is accused, making excuses. I actually recall saying to my children when

they were young and inclined to sprawl on the couch examining their split ends for hours, “What are you going to do today to justify your existence?” In other words, what will you do that is worthwhile?

You know what it means to justify the margins of your document, all the characters line up straight and tall and head in the same direction; there are no wiggles here and there, no wandering lines or errant words. Paul is saying that we are justified when our heart, eyes and feet are moving towards God. That’s heading in the right direction. So the Ockham razor of the explanation is that being righteous means heading in the right direction—endeavoring as Buechner says, “to get it right.” It does not mean that we have it right already.

A key part of this is that our generosity, self-sacrifice, good deeds and good works won’t make God turn us around. The itchy part of this is that God has already turned us around, all of us, but most of us don’t know it, or trust it, or trust God. God’s grace is ours, freely given, but if we don’t acknowledge it, it is useless. I offer my favorite example: If you are starving to death and someone places a piece of bread in your lap, it does you no good unless you pick it up and eat it. So too with the grace of God. In communion we accept God’s saving grace, offered by Jesus as broken bread and drink.

And now for the reason I have been wrestling with righteousness lately. This is a story that is both profoundly personal and expansively universal, so I offer it with humility and amazement.

My mother was a devout atheist; she was not agnostic, she was convinced by science and could in no way see how one could believe in science and also be religious. To her way of thinking, they were mutually exclusive. Though she had been raised and confirmed in the Episcopal faith, she left the church in high school. Her view of God was one of a harsh, judgmental deity and she felt guilt was the scourge of humanity. At one point when she was young, she went to her rector and asked, “The bread and the wine, are they symbols or do they actually turn into flesh and blood?” And the handsome cleric on whom she had quite a crush replied, “They really turn into flesh and blood.” Mother

left his office perplexed, thinking to herself, “They don’t taste like that to me.” And she never went back.

Last month when her death was clearly approaching, I gingerly raised the idea of a memorial service. “You’re not going to give me a Christian burial are you?!”

“Gracious no,” I replied, “You’re not a believer.” But I did go on to explain the value of a memorial service as a time to remember someone and help those who remain. She saw the value in that, mostly I suspect, because she knew it would be good for me.

Four days before she died, before she had had any medication but when she was slipping further and further away, I sat by her bedside, as I did most days and nights. She was seeing things I could not and responding to things that were clearly beyond me. Occasionally she would sit up and say with determination, “I’m leaving.”

“Yes, yes, I know you are,” I’d say, “but why not lie down for a bit more.”

Once she asked with concern, “Do they know we are coming?”

“Yes,” I said reassuringly, “they know we are coming.”

At one point that morning, having gone out of the room for a moment, I returned. “Hi, sweetie,” mum said. “That person behind you—oh, gone now.”

She was pointing up to the ceiling, reaching and gesturing in a way that is familiar to me having been with many people who are dying.

But later that morning, lying in her bed, she stretched out her arm and swept it from right to left and said in a deep voice, “These are the things you did in shame.”

Trying to be Susie practical, I said, “What?”

“These are the things you did in shame,” she repeated three times.

Now, as you can imagine, “shame” is not a word she used readily.

Then she stretched out her arm again and said more softly, “This is the thing you did in righteousness.” And she pointed to me. Righteousness was certainly not in her lexicon, save for perhaps saying that someone was too self-righteous.

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

I was getting a little less flip and a whole lot quieter.

A little while later she pointed to the ceiling and said, “Look at her, look at her!” And she stretched her two rail thin, shaking arms towards the ceiling, brought her hands together and said, “Pray, pray!”

The last thing she said was, “He had a little baby boy.”

Again trying to ground this conversation in some way, I asked, “Who had a little baby boy?”

She swept her hand towards the ceiling, the heavens, at this point I had no bearings left, and she said, “Oh, the big one.”

Aside from a muttered “Hi, sweetie,” the next day, those were her last words.

As you can imagine I was shaken to my core; I still am. I cried for days at the amazing revelatory nature of the experience and the wonder of it all. But mostly because it seems that the very last gift my mother gave me was to say, “What you have predicated your life on and what, let’s face it, you hope is true, is true.”

My son-in-law upon hearing the story, cupped his chin in his hand and said, “Wow, I guess I’d better start behaving.”

I suspect it will be a very long time before I fully process what this all means for me, if, in fact, I ever do. What I do know is that I am taking scripture more seriously these days. And when I read this morning’s passage from Romans, I marvel at how applicable it is to what was happening to my mother. In my bible the passage heading for this chapter is “*Dying and Rising with Christ.*”

From my mother’s witness, I come away with some thoughts. God knows right from wrong. God cares what we do. God takes sin seriously. God takes us more seriously. God’s grace is beyond measure.

Do you ever think, “God loves me, yes, I know, but surely God disapproves of some of the things I do.” Yes, God is with you, but do you cringe when you imagine God’s reaction to your lying, or cheating, or deceiving those you love? What does God think, you might wonder, about the self-destructive habits you can’t seem to shake? I don’t know about you, but when I start listing my faults, in no time I can convince myself that God probably wants nothing to do with me, that I give God a headache. And I curl

in upon myself and start pacing in circles of futility. We tend to think that our deeds or misdeeds condemn us in God's eyes.

Nothing, I believe, could be farther from the truth. I think God picks up, dusts off and sets on the right path those who, like you and me, and my mother aren't always living according to the law.

If you really believed that what would you do? If you could manage to accept your own acceptance, believe that God loves you even though you fudged the books at work—just a little—or said hurtful things to your child, or crossed the line with a co-worker, or cheated on your spouse or partner, or cultivated a grudge rather than let it go, or found yourself very impatient with people who disagree with you about the steeple—if you could manage to accept God's grace--for many made known best in Jesus the Christ--what would you do?

Well, you might just stop pacing around in circles and try to walk a new path, a right path. Good deeds then are the outcome of a life transformed by God, not a prerequisite. There's no getting around it, faith is the ability, most of the time, to believe what we cannot see, to trust and to believe that God is both with us and ahead of us in the future. And God is not with us because of what we have done or not done, because we have been good or upstanding and complied with the law. God is ahead in the darkness.

Here's an image for you: African impalas can jump to a height of over 10 feet and cover a distance of greater than 30 feet. Yet these magnificent creatures can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a 3-foot wall. The animals will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will fall. God asks that we leap beyond the strictures of our lives, beyond the fences that hold us. Faith then is the ability to trust what we cannot see, and with faith we are freed from the flimsy enclosures of life that only our fear allows to entrap us. (John Emmons. *Homiletics*.)

In the passage from Romans Paul refers to these fences that bind us as sin, things that consume our bodies and our passions. We all get caught up in the stuff of the world, our possessions, commitments, schedules, jobs, longings and failings; they fence us in and keep us from leaping like an impala in joy and exaltation. It hard to stay focused on

God when the checkbook is teetering on the edge or demands at work seem unrelenting or family troubles show little hope of easing. So most of the time we circle within our prescribed pasture wearing ruts in the carpet, the lawn our spirits and muttering prayers of desperation now and then.

Reflecting on my mother's revelation, another image has come to mind. Many of us have had toddlers; all of us have been toddlers whether we remember that phase of our childhood or not. But we know well what it looks like when a mom or dad, grandmother, grandfather, sister or brother tries to teach a baby to walk. The adult stands with the toddler between his or her legs and with the little one holding onto the adult's fingers, the child moves forward, sometimes hesitantly, sometimes with such vigor that a face plant is inevitable. Then there comes the moment when the adult lets go and the waiting arms of another reach out to welcome the grinning, stiff-legged eager baby.

In leaving this world, it feels as though my mother said, look ahead, there is a right path before you and though I will slip from your fingers, greater arms await you, calling you forward. We have all experienced loss, whether of a loved one, a job, security, sanity or hope. What we must hold onto is the wild and outrageous idea that God is actually out there and in here, in our hearts, close to us as breathing and distant as the farthest star, charting a course, a right path for us all. It's a little scary to venture forth in faith, not knowing exactly where our feet will land, without a Global Positioning System that will guide our every turn. It requires humility and a willingness to accept your own acceptance, unworthy though you may feel. God is calling your name and reaching with outstretched arms you toddle on feet on of clay towards the light. That's your real GPS: God's Positioning System and when you follow that path, you've got it *right*.

Amen.