

Ash Wednesday (March 2, 2022)
Text: Matthew 6:1-11; 2 Corinthians 5:21
“Called to Be Righteous”

The Lenten season is a time for reflection and repentance ... Repentance for the sinfulness of all humanity in which we share — this has led to Christ’s Passion and for our own sinfulness and individual sins — by which we continually grieve our heavenly Father... Reflection on the sacrifice of Christ — this means a focus on the Cross, and on what new possibilities are now open to us as the bondage to sin has been broken by His sacrifice and victory.

It is especially to that reflection that I invite you in this Lenten Series. I invite you to meditate on, rejoice in, and commit yourselves more deeply to the calling that is ours in Christ. We have been grafted into Christ’s death and resurrection in the waters of baptism, St. Paul tells us. In that washing we were called by Christ to reflect Him to His world. So, tonight we begin. Let’s reflect on the idea that we are called to be righteous.

Righteous and righteousness (the Greek is δικαιοσυνη, δικαιοσυνη) are terms that are used in two ways in the New Testament: On the one hand, the meaning of righteous carries the weight *“to be justified.”* My last name in Greek would be δικαιοσυνη, defined as “just.” It connotes being “made right with God.” This is, of course, the overpowering message of the Cross, to wit, God has taken rebellious, ungrateful, spiteful people such as we, and declared *“You are right in my sight!”*

Hence, St. Paul declares in today’s Second Lesson: ***“God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness [δικαιοσυνη] of God.”*** This is not “call” language; this is declaration: In Christ, you ARE righteous! You have been declared right by God; made right in God’s eyes, by God’s action. The same power that brought into being all things (***“And God said, ‘Let there be . . .’ and there was . . .”***) has worked to bring into being this new reality. Therefore, God says you are no longer rebellious, ungrateful, spiteful —

because God has, by the power of His Word, made you other than what you had been.

But, we hear Christ say in today's Gospel: ***“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them . . .”*** Beware, that is, of acting out your own δικαιοσύνη, your own righteousness. This is the second sense of this concept — it means to act out rightly. Various translations of the terms begin to demonstrate the nuances: “piety” (Revised Standard Version), “alms” (King James Version), “good deeds” (Living Bible; J.B. Philips; Jerusalem Bible), “religious duties” (Today's English Version), “religion” (New English Bible); “acts of righteousness” (New International Version).

Here “righteousness” means “to DO the right.” But what is “the right thing”? We were told that the American astronauts has “the right stuff” — is that synonymous with doing the right thing? Are we talking here about “the will of God”? If so, how do I come to know God's will? Further, if I can know it, how can I do it?

The prophet Micah declared: ***“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*** (6:8). This can be summed up in the Hebraic concept of (mitzvoth) — “deeds of righteousness.” That term is often translated into English as “commands,” “good deeds,” even “the law;” but it is to be understood as “the way to walk” which is what Micah declares it to be: Do *mishpat*, “justice” — seeking the rights of others before your own; Love *chesed*, “mercy, grace” — going beyond just what is right to embrace the other, even if the other is in the wrong; Walk in *hatzanah* “humility” — doing everything from a correct understanding of self.

Thus Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, focuses on what, in Jewish piety, are the three great *mitzvoth*: almsgiving, fasting, and prayer: Almsgiving is “justice” because it provides to others who would otherwise be lacking some semblance of quality of life. Almsgiving is “mercy” because others have no claim on what I call “mine,” but I choose

to give it as I see both need and opportunity. Fasting is “justice” when we deprive ourselves of food and then use those resources to help feed others. Fasting is not merely depriving oneself of food; it was always meant to entail actually seeking the welfare of the poor, the hungry and the oppressed, and thus be “mercy.” Prayer is “justice” when in prayer we seek God’s direction for how we can respond to the needs of others. Prayer is “mercy” when we place the needs of others ahead of our own, petitioning them for God’s favor. And all these are to be done with humility. *hatzanah* can mean “prepared” “ready” even “learned.”

We are declared to be righteous, and then we are called to be righteous. Or to say it another way: We are to live out what God has indeed declared us to be. Or, as the sainted Dr. Oswald Hoffmann, former Speaker of the Lutheran Hour, often said it: “*Become what you are!*” That means we enact the righteousness that has been given to us in baptism. We embody the presence of Christ by becoming His presence in the world.

But NOT, Jesus warns us “*before others in order to be seen by them . . .*” Now we can understand this is a few different ways. We can take Jesus to mean that we should not do what we do “*as a public spectacle.*” Except, that our righteousness is supposed to be a witness to the world; there is no question of that. It is a witness TO the world; it is not for the adulation FROM the world.

Luther made the distinction of walking *coram mundi* or *coram Dei*. The Latin word “coram” means “before” as “in front of.” What Luther observes is that we have choice to walk “before the world” or “before God.” It basically comes down to asking, “*Who is the audience of my life’s drama* (whether you regard that life as a tragedy or a comedy)?” Do I do what I do because I am concerned about what others will think? - or - Do I do what I do because I am concerned about what God thinks? If all that matters to me is how the world views my life — do I have enough of what the world thinks important — then I am walking *coram mundi*. If I am aiming at being the person God wants me to be — the person I see

modeled in Jesus Christ, the True Man — then I am walking *coram Dei*. The reality for most of us is that we do both — we galumph along, straddling between our desire for the adulation of others and our calling to be what God desires us to be.

As we do that, we would do well to pay closer attention to what Jesus says at the end of today's Gospel: “. . . ***where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.***” We tend to turn that around; we may even want to have the opposite be true. So we think that if we work a little at getting our hearts in the right place, then our behaviors will flow out of that. Jesus says it's the other way around: Where you invest your life, that's where your heart will necessarily wind up.

The season of Lent is a reminder to us that when we devote ourselves to meditation and reflection ... when we give ourselves to service and outreach ... when we invest ourselves into the needs of ministry and fellowship ... when we commit ourselves to worship and study ... when, in other words, we follow what is called “the Lenten discipline” our hearts will wind up precisely where God wants them to be.

It is to this that our baptisms summon us. Made right with God, we must do right before God; justified by God's declaration that frees us from the bondage to sin, we must seek justice for all those who are enslaved by any form of oppression.

We who have received God's mercy, we are to love mercy directed to others. We are called to be righteous.

Amen.