

Righteousness

“Love one another, just as I have loved you.”

This is the new commandment.

There are not very many things that Jesus teaches that are not also taught in the Jewish traditions of the Old Testament. Jesus, like many a Jewish prophet reminds his Jewish hearers to just pay attention again to what God has said to them. (Likewise Christian Clergy spend a lot of time inviting people to listen to Jesus!)

But this invitation to love one another, it is a bit more specific. It is an invitation to love in the way you know yourself to be loved by Jesus. And to love, not just generally, but particularly, those who are in your community of faith.

I want, in this sermon, to offer a way to think about this, to remember this and to put it into practice.

I want to use the word *Righteousness*. Now Righteousness has become a bit of an unused word because it is associated with self-righteousness. To call some one righteous can sound like a slur. But this is a good word. Righteousness describes a commitment to a way of living. To be a “righteousness dude” is a compliment in some places. (I think the Rastafarai have contributed this phrase.)

To live in righteousness is to live by the teachings of the Lord, particularly the commandment of love. So how do you get a feel for righteousness?

I have two examples. Here’s the first...

I have three children. Tom is my oldest, and so God taught me a lot through him. He taught me how to see my son in righteousness.

Tom had a best friend called Jim. They were great buddies. In their late teens I began to worry that Tom was slipping off the rails. I worried about this and about that. I feared he would make some of the stupid mistakes I had made. I began to interpret his actions through a filter of suspicion. One day I was at his friend Jim’s house, chatting with his parents, who had become my friends too. They listed all the things about Jim that they worried about. Their furrowed brows and anxious expressions just made me laugh. “Oh, you don’t need to worry about Jim!” I said, “He’s fine! He may be trying stuff out right now, but he’s got such a solid background, he’s such a nice guy, he’ll turn out just fine!”

Walking home I realized I needed to hear my own advice. I needed to look upon my son with trust, not suspicion. I needed to have a wide view of him, not a narrow one. I should look upon him with hope not with fear. I needed to look upon him with righteousness.

It is a way of looking upon someone that I believe God has when God looks on me. I think God sees the best in me and hopes for it, makes doors open for my best to come out through. God expects the best and refuses to expect the worst.

Paul says of this sort of loving gaze...

1 Cor 13⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

I learned to look at my children, in love, as I trust and believe God looks at me.

God is patient, God is kind. God does not envy, God does not boast, God is not proud. ⁵ God does not dishonor others, God is not self-seeking, God is not easily angered, God keeps no record of wrongs.⁶ God does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ God always protects, God always trusts, God always hopes, God always perseveres.

So the path of Righteousness is this path. The path of loving as God loves us.

To love each other, we need to learn to live by this commitment.....

I will be patient, I will be kind. I will be not envy, I will be not boast, I will not be proud. ⁵ I will not dishonor others, I will not be self-seeking, I will not be easily angered, I will keep no record of wrongs. I will not delight in evil but I will rejoice with the truth. I will always protect, I will always trust, I will always hope, I will always persevere.

My second example is about being on the receiving end.

“She said I was trying to destroy the church! She said all I wanted to do was take control and smash anyone who got in my way! How could she say such a thing? I thought she was a Christian!”

In another church, far away and long ago, as they say, I heard these words from a woman who had begun to help with the flower arranging. The head of the Altar Guild had sent her a letter. Fiona, the lady who told me this, had an artistic flair and I had invited her to join the Guild and offer her gift to God through flower arranging. Joanna, the head of the Guild had reacted to her first display of flowers on the altar.

The detail of the flowers, though interesting, is less important than the response.

How had Joanna seen Fiona? With what eyes had she looked? From what position had she approached her offering of flowers?

Have you ever been attacked in this way? Have you ever been assessed on the assumption that you are bad and have badness in mind? Has anyone ever drawn conclusions about you that imply attitudes, assumptions and intentions that never were yours?

Have you ever said things like this about anyone else? Anyone in the Church community? Have you ever allowed your mind to slide down that smooth, wide path of unquestioned criticism, into the self-satisfying conclusion that they are so evil they can be dismissed and rejected out of hand? That they are bad and you are good? No further debate necessary, no further conversation required.

But Righteousness requires of me that *I will not dishonor others, I will not be self-seeking, I will not be easily angered, I will keep no record of wrongs. I will not delight in, and focus on evil, but I will rejoice with the truth. I will be patient with this person, I will be kind to him or her. I will be not envy them, I will be not gossip about their failings, I will not be proud of my superiority. ⁵I will always protect them, I will always trust that they are motivated by goodness, I will always hope they are at least as good as me, I will always persevere in expecting the best in them.*

“I give a new commandment to you: 'Love one another; just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.' “

When people see a church where this is practiced, they enter a community of righteousness. “Here, at last, is the cool clear water of new life. Here is a place where I can be safe. Here is a place where truth is spoken and truth is heard. Here is a place of new life.”

And by this people will know they have come among true disciples of Jesus. And here they too can practice to become followers too.