

“Mending”

Romans 10: 1 – 13

Makemie Memorial Presbyterian Church

October 18, 2009

10 Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ²I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. ³For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. ⁴For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. ⁵Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law that “the person who does these things will live by them.” ⁶But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷“or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. ¹¹The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”

¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

This ends the reading.

Before our sermon this morning I have a little story to share with all of you. It's called "A Christian Bear."

A country preacher decided to skip services one Sunday & head to the hills to do some bear hunting. As he rounded the corner on a perilous twist in the trail, he & a bear collided, sending him & his rifle tumbling down the mountainside. Before he knew it, his rifle went one way & he went the other, landing on a rock and breaking both legs. That was the good news.

The bad news was the ferocious bear charging at him from a distance, & he couldn't move. "Oh, Lord," the preacher prayed, "I'm so sorry for skipping services today to come out here & hunt. Please forgive me & grant me just one wish . . . please make a Christian out of that bear that's coming at me. Please, Lord!"

That very instant, the bear skidded to a halt, fell to its knees, clasped its paws together & began to pray aloud right at the preacher's feet.

"Dear God, please bless this food that I am about to receive!"

Several years ago I received a telephone call from a man I went to college with. We had not spoken in twenty years, but somehow he heard that I had become a Presbyterian minister & he wanted some advice. His best friends, who were also Presbyterian, had just had a baby. They wanted him to stand with them at the boy's baptism & become their child's godfather, but as a Jew he wondered if he could.

We had never spoken of such things in college. I was a silent Christian then & barely aware of his Jewish-ness. Twenty years later, our conversation was so warm that I was sorry we had lost track of one another. We talked about faith & barriers to faith. We talked about similarities between our religions & the things that made them different. He said that he had some thinking to do before he decided about the baptism. Then he thanked me for talking to him. "I can tell you are a righteous person," he said, & hung up.

It was the most unusual compliment I had ever received. As a Christian, I had never heard the word "righteous" used positively in an ordinary conversation. All of my associations were negative, based on the derision with which I heard "self-righteous" or "works-righteous" so often spoken. Wasn't righteousness what people relied on when they didn't have

faith? Clearly, my long lost college classmate knew the word from another context, which allowed him to use it in another way.

I spent days with the word after that, trying to figure out why mainline Christianity had abandoned it. The root word in Hebrew is *sadiq* or justice. A righteous person is a just person, who reflects God's own righteousness by following God's commands. Since those commands are all about how to live in right relationship with God & one another, a righteous person's energies are directed entirely outward, toward others. Righteousness is relational. In every possible relationship, a righteous person lives as God wants – or means to live as God wants. Biblically speaking, the active desire for righteousness is as honorable as the fulfillment of it. The point is to seek God & the kind of life God intends for each of us.

Even now, it is very difficult for me to hear the compliment. I have been so schooled in Paul's words about God that "righteousness" still sounds like the opposite of "faithful" to me. Paul uses some form of the word (in Greek, *dike*) more than sixty times in his letter to the Romans, making a formal distinction between the righteousness people may claim for themselves & the righteousness that only God can give, based on faith in Jesus Christ.

The problem is that two different English words are used to translate Paul's Greek. Sometimes the word comes through as "justification" which most of us associate with the phrase "by faith." Other times the word comes through as "righteousness," which just as many of us associate with "works." Both translations come from single biblical concept – namely that all righteousness/justification comes from God, is sustained by faith & finds its fulfillment in a life distinguished by good works (or fruits of the spirit, if that language is easier on your ears).

Paul didn't have anything against good works, as far as I can tell. He just didn't want anyone getting the chicken confused with the egg. The golden egg of good works doesn't win anyone access to God. Instead, the egg is God's free prize to all who wish to hatch the gift of new life. Meanwhile, righteousness is essential to the process. Paul is famous for his long lists of how Christians are supposed to behave. Once a person has decided to follow Christ, then there is no longer any excuse for greed, gluttony, debauchery, deception, dissension, or litigation (among many other things). Righteousness arrives as God's gift & survives as God's requirement.

According to Matthew, those who hunger & thirst for it are blessed (5:6). Jesus expects the righteousness of his disciples to exceed that of the scribes & Pharisees (5:20). Jesus himself, is God's righteousness in the flesh (3:15). In him, it is possible to see what right relationship with God & neighbor look like. It looks like justice. It looks like compassion. It looks like life lived in a covenant of ferocious, saving love.

I want this word back in my vocabulary. More importantly I want this word back in our vocabulary. I want the reality it names to be recovered by a church that has too often presented faith & works as opponents instead of partners in the divine paradox of grace. The great reformers never lost the paradox, but somewhere along the way their message has been flattened, so that it comes out something like this: All God cares about is whether or not we believe in Jesus. Once our faith has been established any violence we do to one another in our battles of belief are justified, and any mistake we make in the flesh are forgiven. All that matters to God is the inner disposition of our hearts.

When I look at the mischief that kind of theology has produced, I understand the midrash that quotes God as saying, "Would that they would

forsake me, but obey my Torah.” Or as an Anglican scholar puts it, “My dear child, you must believe in God, despite what the clergy tell you.”

One of the Hebrew words for a righteous person suggests “one whose aim is true.” Set beside the word that defines sins as “missing a mark,” this gives me an image of righteousness as target practice. Whether my arrow finds its marks or falls a hundred feet away, the daily practice of right relationship is how I improve my aim. I will continue to sin, no doubt about it, but that is not my aim. My true aim is to live as God wants me to live & as Thomas Merton once wrote – I believe that the wish to please God does in fact please God.

Since I sew more that I shoot arrows, I can’t help but extend the image. It’s a needle I’m wielding on my way through the world, with a sturdy brown thread looped through the silver eye. By the grace of God, I am being mended & God has called me to be a mender too. Since many threads are stronger than one, God has put me on a sewing team. Day by day, our job is to hunt the places where the world is ripped & bend over the damage to do what we can. Every good deed, every kind word, every act of justice & compassion tugs the torn edges closer together. The truer our aim, the smaller our stitches & the longer the patch will hold. We made

plenty of the rips ourselves, & some of the worst ones show evidence of having been mended many times before, but that doesn't seem to discourage anyone.

For you see, we know, mending is how we continue to be mended & we would not trade the work for anything.