

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

29 June 2008

Proper 8; Year A

Texts: Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 89; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

Sermon by: The Rev'd A. Robert Hirschfeld

From Paul's letter to the Romans: No longer present your members to sin as instruments or weapons of righteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments or weapons of righteousness.

And then from this morning's reading from the Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us that

...whoever receives a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous...

Lots of talk about righteousness and the righteous.

I don't know if we've given much thought together about what it means to be righteous. It is a word and concept that is rarely used apart from that troublesome little prefix "self." And so when we hear the word righteous part of our minds immediately attaches that word, and soon we sense we are on dangerous ground. Self-righteous. None of us, I'm sure, want to be thought of as being self-righteous, right? Self-righteousness is that kind of attitude that makes one so convinced, so completely sure of one's own moral superiority or ethical correctness, especially when in contrast to the beliefs or actions of others. Self-righteousness reflects a kind of pride that cuts one off, and separates one from others. "How many lives per gallon?" shouts a bumper sticker on the back of a Hybrid car, effectively saying to those driving behind that we are more guilty of homicide and eco-cide because we are in a conventional car, no matter how economically or stingily we are trying to drive. That's a small example of self-righteousness... A kind of moral superiority that does not foster healthy communication or the deepening of relationship, but rather tosses a verbal bomb, and then walks, or drives away. Often marked by anger, loud, and rigid rhetoric, bumper sticker politics and religion. They state where we stand, but rarely invite the other into conversation, let alone conversion. You might remember the Saturday Night Live comedian Dana Carvey's portrayal of the Church Lady, who attributed everyone she disagreed with as having satanic motivations. His often funny skits pointed to the painful fact that many see self righteousness as the besetting sin of church goers.

It's so hard to guard against that kind of thing. I'm considering how righteous I am at this moment because I have so far avoided putting bumper stickers on my car. Good for me.

So what does Paul, what does Jesus mean by righteousness? And why should we care? It seems like such a foreign word to our usual vocabulary that as a Christian community, we may have given up on righteousness as an orientation to our life, as a way of patterning our life. That this might be true, that we've kind of pushed righteousness to the margins of our life, might be reflected in how it's used in our speech. "I just got back from a long bike ride, so I'm feeling particularly righteous right now." Or as I remember hearing someone at Donatello's once, "What do you have that's righteous to eat here?" That sweet man, may he rest in peace, responded, "You want righteous? Go to church. But first, why not try my chocolate canoli!"

When Paul speaks today of righteousness, it follows a short but very compelling vision of the profound change to our human nature ushered in by Jesus' death and resurrection and our joining that Risen Body by our baptism. We heard that passage last week: "The death Christ died, he died to sin, once and for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Righteousness is the result of our living and being together, together with God within Jesus who has conquered sin which is what separates us from God and each other. Sin includes pride and self-righteousness, it includes greed, lust, fear, hatred, so many things, all of which have been rendered powerless when we know ourselves as members of Christ's risen body, a body that is joined and living in the presence and power and the love of God. Righteousness is much more than simply being right or correct over and against those who we see are wrong or misguided or misinformed or even evil.

Righteousness is about living in relationship. Righteousness is what we see when we are living in that joyful freedom knowing that we have already died and we are already made abundantly alive as we live in Christ. We give of our selves and our substance not out of rote obedience, but as an expression of our being connected to each other and to God. Think of what enables Jesus's righteousness as John's gospel describes it at the Last Supper...Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he began to pour water into a basin and began to wash his disciples feet."

Righteousness comes from knowing that we are immune from all the world might do to us, because in the Name of Jesus, in the very reality of Christ, we have all of God's love poured into us, even our bodies. And the fruit of righteousness is that service, this humble giving of oneself for the benefit of the other, even, and especially the annoying,

the mistaken, the incorrect. Were any, any of his Jesus's apostles correct, sweet, kind, theologically or politically correct? Show me where in the bible Jesus that he was ever impressed with their wisdom or their rightness. But, know whose he is and whose they are, Jesus loved them. To the end. That's righteousness. And we could use to talk more about that way of being, and putting it out there. Sometimes I wonder of our practical theology of church is about teaching our childing about what is right, what is correct, politically, ecologically, morally. That's all good, but it begins to get old if we don't attach our concern about the world, about social justice, world peace, environmental healing, to our relationship to the God without whose love and power and grace all things things are possible.

In the next year we will hear a word that reflects the kind of righteousness I believe the bible is speaks of. It might take an unfamiliar word, a word taken from another culture, for us to come to a refreshed understanding of our own language. Ubuttu is a word taken from the southern african bantu language that archbishop desmond tutu has helped introduce to north american episcopalians, and ubuttu refers to the sense that the worth of the individual is derived primarily not from ourselves alone but from our involvement and interaction with the community. My self worth, my own welfare and inner health and holiness, is not of my own creation, but depends utterly on your welfare, health, holiness, being. This church will be doomed if we see it merely as a collection of likeminded individuals, and not as an integrated body of individuals who come together to find their life in the Risen Body of Christ who is himself a member of the another collective, abother communion of the Holy Trinity. The power, the multiplying grace of God that abounds to us when we see this at work is truly astounding, as I have been told again and again by those who came to a special healing service a couple weeks ago. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective, says James, not because the righteous is correct or right, but because the righteous know of their utter dependence on the God and those whom God calls in the Spirit of love. Ubuttu will be the theme of the upcoming General Convention of the Episcopal Church next summer, and what a well chosen world view for us to uphold for the healing of a church and a world that has too often forgotten how God yearns to draw each of us, and all of our straining and riven creation, into God's presence.

What is ubuttu? It's a way of imagining righteousness for us North American isolated suburban consumers whose lives have too often been seen as all about me, instead of we. It defies a Merriam Webster definition, but I think it's best expressed by Jesus, the Word of God, who described this way: Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these my little ones, these my wayward often misguided disciples, in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward. Amen.