

**Back to Basics©**

**Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13**  
**DeHaven Gates**

**February 5, 2017**

**Dr. Sharlyn**

It seems like we've been hearing that word – righteousness – in quite a few Scripture lessons lately. It occurred to me that maybe we ought to clarify just what righteousness really looks like. I'd be interested in hearing your definition of righteousness. Any volunteers?

In the Old Testament references that I looked up, almost all of them referred to the word *Justice*. *Righteousness* and *justice* seem to go together.

God says, in Amos 5:21-24: 21 "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. 22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. 23 Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. 24 But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

And in Isaiah 1:16-17: 16 Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. 17 Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.

In the New Testament much of the description of righteousness has to do with God giving us salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are made righteous through the one who took our sins away. We are then to look and act like Jesus. That's how righteousness looks.

Of course, to describe God is to see pure righteousness because He is pure, holy, just, merciful – perfect. We, who are believers, are made righteous through Jesus, and we are to live out that righteousness in what we do.

But Jesus' description of how we are righteous is simple. At least in a way it is. He says we are the salt of the earth. Salt? How does that work? How to we get to be salt? What do we have to do to be salt?

Jesus doesn't say – Go, try your best to be salt.

He doesn't say – You might want to look into taking some classes at the Salt University so you can learn how to be salt.

Jesus doesn't say – Take 30 minutes each day to meditate and try to be in touch with your inner saltiness.

Jesus says you ARE salt. You already are the salt of the earth if you are his disciple. If you trust and believe in him; if you have let him into your heart as Lord – as your Savior – you are already salt. Righteous people look like salt. Because they are salt.

Clear as mud, right?

In Biblical days, salt was a very important commodity. It was used for sacrifice, for purification, for seasoning and for preservation.

So think about we, who are Christians (Christ followers – the Church), being all those things for the world: sacrifice, purification, seasoning and preservation.

And we must be true to the mission that the Church has been given. Otherwise we are apt to lose our saltiness. We will become contaminated by the world that we are so close to. If we lose our saltiness, then we are no good anymore. We might as well be thrown out and stepped on.

This is very much the same word we get from the Old Testament text for this morning from Isaiah 58. The Israelites had been in exile in Babylonia for many years. But now some had returned home to Jerusalem. But there was no temple, no monarchy. Everything had been wiped out. They weren't sure what to do. But they knew certain religious rites and disciplines and they practiced them.

In this particular story, they are fasting. Taking a time for not eating, putting on sackcloth. Looking prayerful and somber. They've been practicing these things faithfully for a while. But God seems to be ignoring them and they are indignant about it.

We are doing all these right things for worship – all the things we have been taught we should do, but Yahweh! You seem to be ignoring us. Why are you not helping us? What more do you want from us?

And Yahweh (God) answers them. He says I see you fasting. I see you doing all the things you think are pleasing to me. That's all well and good but you are not doing them for the right reasons. Your hearts are not in it. Your fast is for wickedness; it is to exploit your neighbor; it is for all the wrong reasons.

The fast I desire is ...

To loose the bonds of wickedness,  
 To undo heavy burdens,  
 To let the oppressed go free,  
 To share your bread with the hungry,  
 to bring to your house the poor who are cast out;  
 When you see the naked, that you cover him,

Then, says the Lord,

Your healing shall spring forth speedily,  
 And your righteousness shall go before you;  
 The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.  
<sup>9</sup> Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
 You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I *am*.'

So, how do we, the congregation at Holly Presbyterian Church, apply this passage to our lives and ministry here? Does it apply to us? I mean, we aren't too regular in fasting, are we? So right there, we are kind of left out. Or so it might seem.

But, is this really about fasting? Or is fasting a symbol of our own rituals that we do in worship? I think fasting stands for our tradition – the things we do all the time in worship.

Think about it. We are a Reformed denomination – meaning we have moved and changed from the Roman Catholic Church, which is the mother church to us and other denominations. We do certain things every Sunday. We have an order and we pretty much expect that we will be doing the same things – because that’s what we’ve always done. Right?

Think about it. We do a responsive Call to Worship. And we say together a Prayer of Confession of Sin. But I wonder how many of us, feel deep in our hearts the sorrow for the sin we are confessing. In fact, some of the liturgy our resources have don’t ever quite name the sin. So you might be confused about what you’re confessing. I try to make sure it makes sense for us.

But do you see what I mean? I’ll just bet there are some here who might read the words on the screen or in your bulletin and not think too much about what you’re actually confessing. And that you haven’t thought much about how that prayer could apply to you.

Or sometimes I think we are guilty of singing the hymns but not really thinking about what the words say. Or thinking “This is me. This is how I feel or act.”

It’s so easy to get into a rut and not pay attention to what we doing. It’s so easy to get comfortable and not want to step outside what we know.

We are so very good at fellowship, aren’t we? We love so much to be together that sometimes it’s difficult to get everyone into the sanctuary. And that love for another is genuine. I know that for sure.

But, we must be very careful to not get too comfortable. We aren’t here just for our own nurturing; our own pleasure. We aren’t here just to help us get through another week; to give us the joy and the energy to be able to get up on Monday morning and get to work.

God’s word is still good for his people today. He wants our worship to be genuine; our fellowship to be loving and joyful. But what pleases God most is our saltiness.

That is, we – as the Church who follows Jesus – we are called to seek out those who are hurting, those who are anxious, those who are oppressed, those many people who do not know the salvation that is given to us.

Our worship should be a springboard for our going out to be salt to the neighborhood and community. Our worship should result in challenge; in not just waiting for someone to come to us, but we go to them, offer a friendly hand. Help them come to know the wonderful life with Jesus.

In the passage in Matthew, Jesus went on to tell the people that although the Pharisees were devout people, striving to look holy and to be holy, even though they were great keepers of the Law, their hearts were not it. They could keep the laws but they were not loving, they did not extend mercy and justice (not all but some). They were too intent on the law. So much so that they missed the point of what the Law was for. The Law (the 10 Commandments) were to help the people live righteous lives.

Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And then he said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

That’s huge. Because the Pharisees and Scribes were known to be upholding the Scripture. But they were full of knowledge but did not fulfill the action the knowledge was calling them to do.

Knowing about God, about Jesus and the cross, about the Holy Spirit; worshipping here on Sunday where we are comfortable and safe, but then not being interested in those in our community who are hurting, who are suffering, who are lost is knowledge without a purpose.

Let us be challenged to worship with authenticity and to let it move us to genuinely be the salt of the earth. Let us pray that God will show us new ways to use our saltiness. Let us be full of flavor and purpose.

Amen

© Copyright 2017. All Rights Reserved.