

Sermon – First Sunday After Epiphany

Scripture Texts: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *In Jesus baptism, God's commitment to right relationship with creation (i.e. righteousness) is established and affirmed. In our own baptisms, we are invited to join in the work of restoring that right relationship throughout God's creation.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline

1. "To fulfill all righteousness..."
 - a. "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." What does Jesus mean here?
 - b. Many of you have met one of my dearest friends, Dan, who has preached here...
 - i. Dan is in the ordination process, and serving at various churches
 - ii. At one bigger church, while assisting with communion, he asked what he should do for those seeking a blessing; blessing is a duty reserved for priests.
 - iii. The priest's beautiful response was "Well, you're a baptized Christian, right?"
 - iv. "The priesthood of all believers" – While there is particular authority granted in ordination, all Christians are given authority by Jesus
 - c. Focusing on legalistic righteousness
 - i. It's easy for some of us to get hung up here...
 - ii. Blessing is for ordained priests; communion is for those who have been baptized; service on Vestry is reserved for folks who are confirmed; to get married in the church, at least one person must be a baptized Christian (and you better not try to schedule a wedding during Lent...or even think about marrying someone of the wrong religion or race or gender), etc.
 - iii. Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that we throw all the systems and standards out the window(some, yes, when they are products of bigotry – but many do have value!). As I say in the bulletin every week, I do think baptism should ideally precede the reception of communion – but I'm also very aware that God refuses to be limited by the systems and standards that we humans construct!
 - d. So, what does Jesus mean when he talks about fulfilling righteousness?
 - i. Such legalistic righteousness doesn't seem to fit, but...?
 - ii. Baptism is an initiation rite; perhaps Jesus needs this to be fully prepared and "ordained" for his ministry?
 - iii. Like a fantasy novel series I'm reading currently – the heroes can access incredible / magical powers, but only if they first "speak the words"; the making of particular oaths is a pre-requisite for everything else.
2. Expanding our view of righteousness
 - a. There is a real problem with legalistic, "proper order" kind of righteousness: the damage it can do!

- i. I read with horror a couple of years ago about a priest who used a wrong linguistic formula in baptisms over his more than 20 year ministry. This led to the baptisms being ruled invalid – and hence marriages and ordinations and so on also being considered invalid.
 - ii. Some of you have also experienced the harm of this kind of legalistic righteousness – having been unable to marry or remarry.
 - iii. Others have faced burdens of guilt and shame.
 - iv. At its worst, this becomes a means for those in power to exert control over others – to demand obedience, conformity, and submission. At its worst, this legalistic righteousness becomes a way of blaming the victims: of blaming the woman because her skirt was too short, of blaming the family who is trying to escape horrific conditions and build a new life in a new country, of blaming a person for not complying quickly enough with law enforcement orders.
 - b. That alone should be enough to say that this legalistic righteousness can't be what Jesus means! After all, Jesus tells us later in Matthew's Gospel that we can distinguish between the true and the false followers by looking at the fruit that their lives bear.
 - c. But this text also challenges that legalistic reading.
 - i. John knows that Jesus doesn't need to be baptized!
 - ii. When we look at the word being translated as righteousness, we see something much richer.
 - d. δικαιοσύνη = "di-kai-os-u-nay" is the Greek word here, and it carries with it a relational aspect that is not easily translated.
 - i. It can't just be a cold, check list kind of righteousness; rather, this sense of righteousness is about being in right relationship – with our Creator and with our fellow creatures.
 - ii. Even more, in its use in Scripture, it depends on God's work to restore right relationship with us!
 - iii. We see this especially in today's passage from Isaiah – it is God who creates, who establishes right relationship with us, who calls us to righteousness, who takes us by the hand and keeps us, who makes covenant with us and with all of creation, so that we might be part of God's work of bringing light and healing and freedom to all people.
3. Then what is baptism about?
- a. So, what does this expanded sense of righteousness have to do with baptism?
 - b. Baptism is a rite of initiation and affirmation. We see that here, as Jesus' ministry begins with his baptism.
 - i. This is the first appearance of Jesus as a grown man, ready to fulfill the words of the angels and the prophets and the Magi.
 - ii. In choosing to be baptized, he is committing himself to right relationship, with God and with creation.
 - iii. Isaiah tells us what this looks like: not a cold, legalistic righteousness, but a bringing forth of justice that allows all people to flourish, that cares especially for the weak and vulnerable and hurting: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench."
 - iv. In Jesus, God enters fully into right relationship with creation, not by exerting power and demanding conformity, but by becoming a creature – so that Jesus'

life and death and resurrection might be a channel and fulfillment of God's covenant with creation.

- v. This is affirmed in the baptism as the heavens split open and the voice sounds out: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."
- c. And, in our own baptisms, we too are invited into right relationship – into righteousness in all the fullness of that word.
 - i. This is why we speak of a baptismal covenant, a covenant that we reaffirm every time we baptize someone – and on special days like this feast day.
 - ii. In our baptism covenant, we affirm our recognition of Jesus as the revelation and fulfillment of God's righteousness. And, we commit ourselves to living in a way that reflects his grace and love and mercy: by continuing in the fellowship of the church and the sacraments, by resisting evil, by proclaiming good news, by loving our neighbors, and by striving for justice and respecting the dignity of every human being.
 - iii. This is a big calling, and we will – of course – fail regularly. But the good news is that our call to righteousness does not ultimately depend on our will or courage or strength, but on God's commitment to us: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching."
(Amen.)

So, trusting in the grace and righteousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ,
let us stand together and reaffirm our baptismal covenant.