

Sermon: **Righteousness Embodied**

Text: Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

Reverend James R. Henry
The Elijah Kellogg Congregational Church
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*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

When he wrote that prayer in the 13th century, St. Francis of Assisi caught the flavor and import of our Scripture lessons for this morning.

When John the Baptist came preaching his message of repentance and announcing that the Kingdom of God was near, he pointed specifically and directly to Jesus who would, himself, be the fulfillment of God's redeeming action and reconciling love... the very embodiment of God's righteousness.

John was not preaching a new theory of justice or a new doctrine of righteousness or a 10 step plan for personal happiness. He was introducing Jesus Christ himself to be the revelation of God in flesh and blood... the embodiment of God's way and God's truth and God's life.

When Jesus submitted himself to the baptism of John and so united himself with us in human kind, he said that this was a fitting aspect of God's way of fulfilling all righteousness. The heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove and the voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

It was not the case that new tablets of stone descended from heaven with a new set of commandments. The voice did not say, "Here's a new idea... an updated set of commandments... a 10 step plan for achieving righteousness. Here it is in its final form."

Rather it was, "Here is my Son, endowed with my Spirit. I am pleased with him. He is the fulfillment of my righteousness made known to all".

And that was the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, opening up a new age and a new way. Jesus began to meet our broken and alienated world, reaching out to sinners of every sort, and setting things right between us and God and with each other.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus said that he had not come to nullify the law but to fulfill it. He was to fulfill it in his life, death and resurrection as the embodiment of God's righteousness, manifesting God's way and truth and life, lived out visibly.

As the fulfillment of God's righteousness... as the embodiment of God's righteousness, he took the form of a servant; always conscious of doing God's will, not his own desire; always motivated by God's word, not his own ideas; always doing God's work, not his own endeavor.

And the focus of his preaching and teaching to us was about the righteousness of God being embodied in us. Remember how he preached... "You have heard the law; you know it so well; you know all the "shalts" and "shalt nots" of the commandments. But I tell you that these things are to be in your heart. They are to be brought to birth within you, in newness of life as the very embodiment of righteousness.

It is often said on this Baptism of our Lord Sunday, "You are baptized to newness of life. Now live out your baptism in a manner that expresses the reality of who you are in Christ, manifesting the fruit of the Spirit...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. Jesus taught us that this new way was not simply living according to the law, posted externally; but living by the Spirit of God, planted internally... embodied.

We can hear the same tone in Isaiah's Servant Song. We can learn a lot from it as we seek to live out our baptism as the servants of God and as the embodiment of his righteousness today. How will we present ourselves to the world? How does God will to present us to the world as the embodiment of his righteousness and justice?

"Here is my servant." That's our identity; our calling and character. We are to be the extension of God's way of righteousness shown to us in Jesus.

In Isaiah's song, the servant lives in loving relationship with God as his child, beloved. And the servant's character and manner of service bring together the very might and power of God acting in gentle, tender care. He will not snap a bruised reed. He will not quench a smoldering wick. He will not hurt a flea. Yet he will not grow faint and be quenched. He will bring forth justice and righteousness firmly, but quietly; surely, but gently; faithfully, consistently, and powerfully serving the bruised and weak, the smoldering and the suffering.

Thus says the Lord to us, his servants: "I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and have and will keep you. Those words to us his servants are the secret and explanation of a most beautiful and mysterious blend of power and gentleness; firmness and quietness; strength and weakness.

Hear God's word to you.

"I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness." This is all about God's righteousness, not yours or mine. It is God, not the servant who transforms his own world. God is the power behind what he calls us to do as his servants. It is by God's Spirit, not by the servant's force or authority or power, that true justice will be achieved. Never forget that. Let it humble you. But let it also encourage you.

But then also understand that God has willed to use us as his servants ("instrument" as St. Francis puts it) to bring about the realization of his righteousness and justice as it is embodied in our lives as we live and serve in the name and way of Jesus. God is the God of ultimate power and resolve, who brings about new things, and his servants are his chosen instruments through which his newness is implemented in the world.

So God says, "I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and kept you." What a beautiful picture of God, in the fullness of his power, gently leading us by the hand.

Let me come back to where I began. Ultimately, the justice and righteousness of God, as it has been embodied and made known to us in Jesus Christ, will be made known to our world as it is embodied in us and manifest in our character and conduct. I can't see it any other

way. Whatever else we may do by enacting laws and sanctions, by political powers and military forces (however wisely or poorly you may think these are implemented) the ultimate fulfillment of righteousness and justice will not come without the embodiment of God's righteousness in the lives of his servants, (i.e. you and me) manifest in the ways shown to us in Jesus Christ.

I believe that with all my heart. It's at the core of the Gospel and everything God has given to us in Christ. Simply put, that's "you in your small corner, and I in mine." God is the Lord, and he calls each of us to serve him in righteousness, in his ways and in his character. Anything otherwise works counter to the fulfillment of righteousness.

That's an overwhelming thing... except for the fact that the Lord also takes us by the hand and keeps us. So don't be afraid or discouraged. Let your little light shine where you live, and God will somehow make your little light shine as the brightness of his glory. And keep praying... "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.

Amen.