July 24, 2011

The National Presbyterian Church

A Righteousness that is Not *Self*-Righteous

Matthew 5:17-24

Rev. Patrick Willson

Mark Twain once described someone as "a good person in the worst sense of the word."

Our amusement at someone saying something so perfectly outrageous suggests that we understand something of what he was talking about. We know people--good people--whose way of being good and right just puts us off. It puts us off. We have known good people who become caught up in good, worthy causes to such an extent that we dread to see them coming.

We are by no means comfortable admitting this because we like to think of ourselves as good persons, but there is something about some people we would describe as good, something about some forms of goodness that turns us off. These are the righteous ones, and we back away.

So we stand our distance to hear Jesus say, "I tell you, unless your **righteousness** exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." We do not snap to attention, shoulder arms and step forward to march to the drumbeat of such a righteousness. We draw back. We may not know much about "righteousness," but if we hear about righteousness at all, what we hear is inevitably preceded by the

intrusive "self": **self-righteousness**. That we know we don't want to be.

To be righteous in one's self-estimation, to be judged good by one's self-assessment is to embrace a self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction, which far from appealing, is downright alienating.

Not all of the walls between people are built out of spite. Some are constructed by our desire to be good, by our need to be right. We know so well the pain that evil can cause, but we forget that goodness produces its own casualties.

The theological discipline that deals with judgments of goodness is ethics. Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches ethics at Duke Divinity School, grew up in Pleasant Grove, Texas, a wide place in the road where pickups have gun racks and folks are as comfortable handling firearms as driving a car.

Hauerwas' father was not a demonstrative man, but one of those fathers who showed his love quietly, mostly by bringing home a pay check, putting food on the table, a roof over the family's head and making sure his son's college education would be paid for so he could do better.

When young Hauerwas went off to college he learned of a larger world and a larger, more complicated set of values; and when he went off to New Haven, CT., to Yale Divinity School for graduate work in ethics, his world really expanded. His father was never quite certain why the boy was in divinity school if he didn't want to be a preacher, but he always accepted the collect phone calls. The old man's phone conversation always came around to a deer rifle he was gunsmithing: how he was boring the barrel, bluing the steel, and carving the stock. Hauerwas says, "I thought that was fine, since it had nothing to do with me."

Returning to Pleasant Grove for Christmas he had barely made it through the door before his father was thrusting the completed rifle into his arms.

"It was indeed a beautiful piece of craftsmanship," Hauerwas says, "and I said so." But because his studies in ethics had also taught him the importance of being good and truthful and right, and because he was morally serious about social issues, he went on to say, "Of course, you realize that it will not be long before we as a society are going to have to take these things away from you people."

> Years later Professor of Ethics Stanley Hauerwas writes: *Morally what I said still seems to me to be exactly right as a social policy. But that I made such a statement in that context is one of the lowest points in my "moral development.". . . For what my father was saying, of course, was some day this will be yours and it will be a sign of how much I cared about you. But all I could see was a gun, and in the name of moral righteousness, I callously rejected it.*[i]

Being right and righteous can exact a terrible toll not only on those who would actively oppose us, but even from those who would like just to be with us and love us.

Is anyone feeling smug right now? Self-righteous? Then let me tell you another story.

More than thirty years ago, I was visiting an elder in the hospital. As I stood to leave he told me, "You don't know old so-and-so, but he used to be a member of our church, a real active member. He's just down the hall here. He's dying of cancer. If you have a minute, drop in on him."

That's hardly the sort of visit pastors relish, but I stopped by the man's room. We talked for a while. "Old so-and-so" seemed torn in half by my presence: on the one hand pleased that I had come yet uncertain if it were proper to enjoy my visit.

He told me about Men of the Church catfish fries in Mississippi of the 1950's; how he was a Presbyterian elder, like his father and grandfather before him; how he had once heard James Stewart preach—"now there's a preacher for you!"

I was fascinated and finally asked, "Why did you stop coming to church?"

His face flushed red: "It was that damn National Council of Churches!"

After that flash of anger we both fell silent for a moment. I nerved myself to ask, "What about that? What did they do?"

I know he was on a lot of medication, and that he was old and tired and sick and dying. For a moment he seemed to be mentally shuffling through old desk drawers. Finally he shook his

head, defeated in his effort, “I can't remember, but they were wrong, **wrong**!”

They were wrong and he was right. I’m sure it was about civil rights in the ’60’s. Because he was right and they were wrong he had exiled himself. It was a life sentence. In his own mind at least, to be right meant denying himself the church he loved, the joy of worship, the fellowship of friends, the comfort of the church in his final days. Being right can exact terrible penalties from us.

Garrison Keillor remembers the denomination in which he was raised, The Church of the Brethren:

> *We were “exclusive” Brethren, a branch that believed in keeping itself pure . . . by avoiding association with the impure. Once having tasted the pleasure of being Correct . . .* [we] *kept right on and broke up at every opportunity, until, by the time I came along, there were dozens of tiny Brethren groups, none of which were speaking to any of the others. Patching up was not a Brethren talent. As my Grandpa once said of* [another group of] *Brethren, “Anytime they want to come to us and admit their mistake, we're perfectly happy to sit and listen to them and then come to a decision about accepting them back.* [ii]

That's funny. But the truth is painful to bear. When I was training in marriage and family counseling I was seeing a couple and getting nowhere fast. Every session dissolved into an extended argument without either resolution or reconciliation. I didn't know what I could do for them. I asked a colleague to listen to a tape of one of our sessions.

“You need to ask these people,” he said, “if they would rather be right or married.”

To be right, to know the right thing and to choose the right thing can divide and separate people.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ time understood this. The Pharisees have taken quite a beating from Christian pulpits, but one thing we do have to say about them is that they were good people, people who took seriously God’s law. To be good people, to be

God's people, they understood that they might have to live separately. Indeed, it seems that the very name "Pharisee" means "separate." They sought to please and honor and glorify God by separating themselves from everything and everyone that did not please and honor and glorify God. If you have questions about the Pharisees save them for Pastor David Renwick. He read the literature on the Pharisees when he was doing his Ph.D. at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, and he knows that stuff.[iii] For the time being it is enough to say that the Pharisees were good folk, and we could doubtless think of many reasons for praising them for their moral seriousness.

If Jesus praises them, it is something of a back-handed compliment, as if to say, yes, they are good—but not good enough: "I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus goes on to explain: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'…But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

It is good not to murder, not to kill other people. But it is not enough. We are also to surrender our anger, our insults, the put-downs, perhaps even our own self-righteousness, everything, in fact that would separate us from brothers and sisters. Even our religious obligations are put on hold: "when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." This is not less than the law of God, nor is it something other than the law of God, it is the fulfillment of the law of God.

"Do not think," Jesus says, "that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets." Jesus is not some antinomian or some moral relativist. He is not suggesting we shelve the law of God or exchange righteousness for chumminess. No: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." The law of God is not fulfilled simply in

keeping its letter, however. There is something more, Jesus says. Something more.

More than observing the letter of the law, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount summons us to a higher, deeper, broader righteousness. Righteousness?

The Bible has the most curious way of speaking of righteousness. When God hears the cries of slaves in Egypt and reaches downward to embrace them so they become God's own people, the Bible calls that righteousness. When God stands up like a warrior to defend the cause of the poor and homeless and dispossessed, the Scriptures name that righteousness. When God reaches down into the very depths and rescues the psalmist from despair, the psalmist sings of God's righteousness.

Righteousness, in the Hebrew Bible, is the action of the Holy One who overcomes separateness and reconciles people. When God gives the law so that people can live together in God's peace, that is righteousness. When the Apostle Paul speaks of righteousness he does not imagine it as a measuring tape by which God sizes up the disciples; righteousness is God's wrapping us in grace and mercy so we may live as God's servants in the grand drama of reconciliation. For Paul righteousness comes wrapped in reconciliation:

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake [God] *him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in* [Christ] *we might become the righteousness of God.* (II Cor. 5:19-21)

Keeping the law alone may separate but the fulfillment of the law is to bring people together in reconciliation. The fulfillment of the law is seen in God's movement of reaching out—even to the unrighteous.

Years ago a friend gave me a treasured gift. To treasure that gift, I pass it on. It is a theatrical review of that most unlikely source of sermon material, *The Village Voice.* The reviewer wrote of a production of Tennessee Williams' "The Night of the Iguana" starring Dorothy McGuire.

There was an unexpected prologue to last Friday night's performance of "The Night of the Iguana." At about the time the performance was scheduled to begin, a woman in the audience—a stout, middle-aged woman in a blue print dress—suddenly began shouting, "Start the show! Start the show! I want to see Dorothy McGuire! I love Dorothy McGuire." The people sitting next to her were quickly evacuated to other seats; usherettes, and someone who must have been the house manager came to reason with her, but she continued to shout.

After a moment of shock, the audience began to get ugly, applauding and laughing derisively… "Listen, you old bag, get out!" somebody shouted at her. "Throw her out and start the show!" shouted somebody else. Some people began to boo the shouters. "All I want to see," said the woman in the blue dress firmly, "is Dorothy McGuire, and then I will leave."

Finally Miss McGuire herself appeared, crossed the stage to where the woman was sitting, spoke to her soothingly and hugged her. And the woman, who had pulled back when anyone had touched her, quietly allowed Miss McGuire to lead her away—as if, like Blanche DuBois, she had always depended on the kindness of strangers. As they crossed the stage toward the exit, Miss McGuire—who had met the situation with remarkable poise and grace and kindness—paused and said to the audience, "I'd just like to introduce another fellow human being." [iv]

That is righteousness—righteousness that reaches out to overcome separation—a reconciling righteousness that can lead us to be good people—in the very best sense of the word.

Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.

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[i] Stanley Hauerwas, "Character, Narrative, and Growth in the Christian Life," in *A Community of Character (*Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 145-6.

[ii] Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days* (New York: Viking, 1985), pp.105-106, 107.

[iii] See "Paul the Pharisee," in David A. Renwick, *Paul, the Temple and the Presence of God,* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991),p.3-23.

[iv] I am indebted to Dr. Charles Rice of Drew Theological School for the review; Julius Novick, "Mr. Williams and the Crazy Lady, *The Village Voice,* December 27, 1972, p. 73-74.