

What is Righteousness?

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This week, I had a very full calendar of meetings and tasks already when I received a last minute invitation to meet with other clergy at the Capitol on Thursday morning. The gathering was organized by pastors from Houston and Dallas and attended by people from all across Texas who were asking for some righteous action from our state leaders. I'll tell you more about the event later.

But first, what does it mean to be righteous? What is it that the people gathered at the Capitol this week were asking for? Many people - and many dictionaries - would say righteousness means being morally right. Which is fine, but what does it mean to be morally right?

In the public imagination, righteousness is a sense that one's beliefs, actions, and relationships are virtuous. Maybe even that they are more virtuous than those of other people. When thinking about what makes a person righteous, we might be tempted to calculate what these things say about us and our value to the community.

But of course, that is the definition of self-righteousness. Of feeling holier-than-thou. Of being different and separate from those who are deemed unrighteous, un-virtuous, un-valuable. Or even different and separate from those who are not deemed anything at all.

And yet, there is something about the way we operate in the world - our beliefs, actions and associations - that can be linked to righteousness. What is it?

For Jeremiah righteousness has something to do with bringing lost sheep back into the fold, bringing lost community members back to safety and fruitfulness. The lost sheep he's talking about are, of course, the people of Israel who have been mistreated by their shepherds, their political and religious leaders. If bringing the lost back home is righteous, clearly causing them to get lost is unrighteous.

These sheep didn't get lost all by themselves! Jeremiah says to the shepherds - which is a metaphor for the kings:

- "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep..."
- "you have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them."

The sheep are not going to get themselves un-lost by pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps, to mix our metaphors. It is the responsibility of the shepherds to not lose them in the first place. God has expectations of people in power; that privilege includes a

responsibility of care and protection. In Jeremiah's time, those in power have forgotten their obligation and it has caused harm to the people over whom they have charge. The sheep.

People should not have to fear the ones who are supposed to protect them.

To rectify this situation, Jeremiah tells the people of Israel and tells us, the Lord will gather the lost, bring them to safety, and they will be fruitful again. And then the Lord is going to raise up shepherds who are actually going to do their job - they will be righteous, they will not lose their sheep.

The Lord is going to raise up a righteous leader. And what does a righteous leader do? A righteous leader will execute justice and allow Israel to live in safety. Jeremiah is very clear that there is a direct link between how leaders care for the people and righteousness. Righteousness is not a person's individual characteristics or opinions or personal piety. No. Righteousness is something that can be seen and experienced by the community.

Another way we can understand righteousness is by looking to the one we believe is the righteous king God sent: Jesus. The Gospel today tells us what a righteous leader does. When Jesus is preaching, teaching, and ministering in Galilee, he is mobbed by people clamoring for help. And when he sees them he has compassion for them "because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

How does Jesus, the righteous leader, the shepherd, respond to these lost sheep? He stays right in the midst of them. Righteousness is being with them, tending to them, having compassion on them.

So we have two ways to understand righteousness before us today:

- Righteousness involves caring for the ones God loves, not harming those that God loves.
- Righteousness includes being with the ones who need help the most, being in their midst, feeling their suffering, and offering healing and protection.

Now back to the gathering of clergy at the Capitol this week.

We were there to protest the Senate and House bills in the Texas legislature that will change voting regulations in our state. I am aware that this issue of how and whether to make these changes has become highly charged and partisan. People have strong feelings on all sides and I suspect that all of them feel like their position is, in some way, righteous.

I am not here to tell the people of St. Mark's which side to take in a political debate. What I will tell you, however, is a good way to get there.

The first and longest part of the gathering at the Capitol was a prayer service. Pastor after pastor prayed for our lawmakers, for their constituents, for justice. Over and over we heard pleas for healing of division, a longing to be heard.

The vast majority of people in the crowd had experienced in their own lives and in their families being excluded from public life, from public decision-making, from access to vital resources. They had experienced having their concerns for safety and well-being dismissed by those in power. So these prayers did not address hypothetical situations, they were based on well-founded fears.

They were calling on our political leaders to tend to the sheep. Like the kings of Israel, our political leaders have a responsibility to care for and listen to those with the least amount of power. And we were praying that they would do just that. We were asking them to be righteous. To execute justice. After all, there is nothing righteous about using power to cause suffering, exclude people from power structures, or cut them off from life-giving resources.

And so, if we are to view the struggles in our community, our state, our nation from the view point of what is righteous, the first question is not what we would think. The first question is where we would be. What scripture tells us is that righteousness is not separation from the suffering or the outcast. Righteousness seeks them out. So that is where we should be.

Jeremiah says that the Messiah will be called "The Lord is our righteousness." And the gospel shows us that the righteous Lord seeks out, is present with, and brings comfort to those who are suffering. To the lost sheep.

The Lord is our righteousness. Jesus is our righteousness.

Our righteousness flows from following Jesus - being with, listening to, and comforting those who suffer.

Righteousness, as we see in Jesus, begins with compassion.

Righteousness is measured by the safety, justice, and fruitfulness of vulnerable people.

This is a long way of telling you:

Righteousness does not come to us from on high, it comes from our midst. That is where Jesus is and where he calls us to be.

Most of us in this church today are sometimes like a lost sheep and sometimes like a struggling shepherd. We have been let down, and we have let God and others down. We all need an intervention of compassion and justice - an intervention of righteousness.

Righteousness does not begin with policy or legislation or regulation.

Righteousness begins by sitting with and listening to people who are suffering.

Hearing the cries of people who are experiencing division, exclusion, disenfranchisement.

Believing people when they say they are sick, hungry, exploited.
Loving people whom God loves and whom Jesus healed.

We are human, you and I, and after listening to other people tell us about the injustices they have experienced, we may come to different conclusions. We may have different answers to the problems we see around us. Yet one thing is sure, we will only be on the path to righteousness and justice when we start with compassion, when we go into the midst of those who are suffering, when we help gather those who have been lost.

This is where Jesus has called us to be and it is where we can join him.
Amen