



When Righteousness Doesn't Come Easily

TEXT
Matthew 1:18–25;
5:38–42

September 24, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Nathan turned and, with shock on his face, said, “I’ll do anything; just tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

We were fishing. Not from the bank; we were in a canoe. Both of us were very new to fishing. And even more new to a canoe. He caught a big fish: a northern pike. I used a net to land it, or canoe it — and in the process, the fish and the lure and the net became a tangled mess. I had them between my feet, trying to free him. If you haven’t caught a pike before, they are living evidence that there is no orthodontist in the fish world.

While I was busy with this, Nathan caught another fish. He swung the pole around behind him to let me remove it from the lure. When he did, the fish hook caught on my pant leg. It didn’t catch me, but it caught on my pant leg so that the fish was flopping on my leg, the two of us unable to escape each other. I had a pike bouncing at my feet and another fish flapping on my leg. I was clearly not going to produce my own fishing show. Nathan, fearing that the fish hook had caught me, said, “Tell me what to do.

I don’t know what to do; just tell me what to do.”

It was a funny moment.

I tell you that story today because I imagine you have been in situations where you didn’t know what to do, and you just wish someone could tell you what to do. It’s a pretty common experience.

I think Joseph had a moment like that. To fully understand the implications of this story, we have to remember that Joseph lived not only in a different time, but in a different culture. In the ancient world, they treated women differently than we do now — at least in most ways. In the ancient world, they treated pregnancy outside of marriage differently than we do now. In the ancient world, they counted honor and shame differently than we do today. And Joseph, like every other human being in human history, was a product of the time and culture in which he lived.

Mary was pregnant. Normally that would be good news, but Joseph wasn’t the father, as the story goes. Joseph reasonably assumes Mary has been promiscuous. So what should he do? Jewish law provided an answer. If a woman is ac-

cused of being promiscuous, the matter is brought before the elders. If it is shown that her husband is lying, the husband will be required to pay a fine of 100 shekels of silver. The fine is paid to his wife’s father, because it is the father’s honor that has been assaulted. But if the charge is true, the woman is to be taken to the door of her father’s home, and the men of the village gather to stone her to death. And then, the Torah says, in so doing you shall purge the evil from your midst.

That’s righteousness. Or is it? That’s often the assumption of what righteousness is: the purging of evil. But purging evil is so hard to accomplish because so often the act of purging results in unrighteous consequences.

Mary was pregnant. What do you do in this circumstance?

Joseph could have had her put to death, but Joseph was a righteous man. So he decided to put her away quietly. It’s hard to tell if that is altogether different from putting her to death. Sooner or later, pregnancy gets hard to hide. It doesn’t require much imagination to see that an unwed young woman with a child and no husband would have nowhere to

go, no way to live. She would not survive, but at least Joseph would not be directly involved.

If the story ended here, we probably would never have heard of the story of Jesus. There probably would not be a story of Jesus. But the story doesn't end there. It says Joseph had a dream, and in this dream he realizes that God does not want him to put her away quietly.

We aren't told the thought process; we are just told of the decision. Joseph decides not to discard her, but to marry her and to raise her son — to raise him as his own. Joseph chooses what scholars describe as a higher righteousness. It's not a righteousness that comes easily because it's not a righteousness that focuses on the law, but rather on the relationship. To say this more clearly, this higher righteousness pays attention to the consequences, sometimes the unrighteous consequences of our efforts to be righteous.

When I was a kid, I needed to have my tonsils removed. To put me to sleep, they didn't give me an IV. The nurse placed a cone over my face to administer ether. I didn't like the smell, so I protested in my 5-year-old voice: "It stinks!"

My nurse, my caregiver, deceived me. She said, "Blow it away." That seemed reasonable. I took a deep breath. That's the last thing I remember. In trying to blow it away, I took in that which I hated. I could not purge the evil. She said, "Blow it away," and I just sucked it in. Nurse Ratchet.

If I understand the text, we can't purge evil from our lives, from our communities, from our world. We can't because so often in the very act of purging, we take in, take on, become that which we hate.

There is a higher righteousness that is witnessed in the teaching of Jesus. It is a righteousness that is sought not by purging evil, but by choosing relationship — and perhaps more clearly, by paying attention to the consequences of our own righteousness.

I can follow the rules, I can obey the policy, I can be right. But if I am not paying attention to the consequences of my righteousness, I can fail to be good.

My father-in-law was a pastor. With his years of experience, he enjoyed mentoring me. He found great joy in telling me how I ought to do things. But there was a problem. I was 28 and already in ministry about 24 months, so I knew everything. I didn't want to be told how to preach and how to write a newsletter article and how to plan a Session meeting.

But that did not slow his eagerness to guide me. Without fail, every visit would include at least one tense conversation. There we were, two pastors, arguing with one another about ministry.

It took a while, but things changed between us. I figured something out. When we were arguing, the one who was hurt the most was not me. And it certainly wasn't him. It was

Carol. The two men she loved most in the world were at each other.

Both of us knew our own righteousness, but I paid no attention to the consequences of being right. Because I failed to pay attention to what I was doing to my wife, I thought I was righteous but I had sucked in what I hated.

The righteousness of Jesus is never about following the rule; it is about paying attention to the relationship.

In the early moments of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "You have heard it said, but I say to you ..."

You have heard it said, do not kill, but I say to you, do not be angry with your brother or sister.

You have heard it said, do not swear falsely, but I say to you, do not swear at all. Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say, turn the other cheek.

You have heard it said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemy.

What Jesus does is quote the righteousness of the Torah: "You have heard it said ..." But then he shows that we cannot make the rule too simple; we cannot make the law too pedestrian. Righteousness doesn't come that easily. Righteousness is not found in obeying the law; it is found in paying attention to the relationship.

It is a righteousness that is not claimed by purging evil, but by embracing relationship.

I met John when both of us served on the Austin Seminary Board. He is an elder in a congregation in Houston. He told me once of his involvement with prison ministry. He and his wife Gay go into the prisons and lead Bible studies, have times of prayer or just listen to these men and women who spend their years behind bars.

I was inspired by his ministry, and I asked John, "How did you get involved in prison ministry?"

He looked at me and said, "Our daughter was murdered."

In February of 2000, John and Gay and their daughter Christine, 32 years old at the time, went to dinner to celebrate Gay's birthday. Two days later, they got a call. Christine had been murdered. She was killed by an acquaintance.

John said, "I don't know what he saw in her or in himself that allowed him to kill her. But I know God sees them both differently."

"We decided we needed to live our lives trusting that the worst in us does not define us. We have to live toward the light," he said.

That's a higher righteousness. Righteousness is never fully captured by following the rules; it is in being persistent in relationship.

John said he learned this from Jesus. It's the way Jesus thought. I'm trying to learn the same.

I imagine Jesus learned to think like this from Joseph, because that's how Joseph thought. In the most signifi-

cant moment in Joseph's life, when he learned Mary was pregnant, Joseph could have followed the rules and purged evil from his life. But Joseph knew righteousness was more than following the rules. It is being persistent in relationship.

So he did what many would never have had the ability to imagine. He married her and raised her son as if he were his own. Because that's the kind of man Joseph was.

No wonder God chose Joseph to raise his own son.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.