

**October 31, 2004**  
**Habakkuk 2:1-5, Luke 18:9-14**  
**Dr. Lewis Galloway**

**“True Righteousness”**

There are some words that have become tired, worn out and in need of a vacation. A few weeks in the sun with daily trips to the spa and several rounds of golf would do them a world of good. I once heard Dr. Fred Craddock say that one of the most worn out words in the English language is *charity*. In the King James Version of the Bible, charity was a perfectly good word in fine form. For hundreds of years, the language of I Corinthians 13 nurtured the church: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal,” These words were like sweet honey to throat and pleasing melodies to the ear. Over time, something happened to the word charity. Its shoulders began to sag; it lost the spring in its step and the sparkle in its eye; the word charity lost its freshness, its energy and finally its meaning. Charity came to mean little more than writing a check for a good cause, taking clothes and canned goods to the church, and buying a table at a fundraiser. Charity no longer meant the joyful fullness and strength of love. It is sad to see good words go out to pasture.

The word *righteousness* is another word that appears to be in need of renewal. It is a biblical word that seems to have no home outside of the church. The word conjures up images of Pharisees scrupulously keeping the law. When we try to find a home for it in our world, a place where the word makes sense, we immediately think of modern day Pharisees with pursed lips, saccharine smiles, pious platitudes and dried up pleasures. We think of those whose main business in life is tending to the business of others. In our minds eye, we see the morally self-satisfied and spiritually smug people who look down with judging eyes on the beliefs, practices and life of others. I do not believe we can think of *righteousness* without joining the word *self* to it. In common practice and parlance, righteousness has come to mean *self-righteousness*. Maybe it is time we took the word out for a little exercise to help it get into shape and become useful again.

We are not the first to have difficulty understanding righteousness. What does it mean to be a righteous person? The Hebrew Scriptures extol the way of the righteous and condemn the way of the wicked. In the 23rd Psalm King David declared that the Lord leads us in “paths of righteousness.” What way is that? By the time of Jesus the path to righteousness seems to have diverged into two paths. So much of the argument between Jesus and the Pharisees centers on the question of righteousness.

Jesus tells a parable about two men who go up to the Temple to pray. One man is a Pharisee who stands off by himself. In his prayer, he gives thanks to God that he is not like other people. He abstains from evil, worships faithfully and gives away a tenth of all that he has. If he were a member of the church, we might think that his spiritual practices are a model for a person of faith. So what is the problem? His sense of moral

superiority is won at the expense of others. He compares himself to others and likes what he sees in the comparison. His goodness shines when held up against a “thief, rogue, adulterer and tax collector.” He is physically removed from the others because he thinks he is a cut above others. He does not trust in God but in himself. He sees himself as righteous and looks at others with contempt.

The tax collector, aware of his sin, does not even dare to approach others in worship or even lift his eyes to heaven. In an act of self-abasement, he empties himself of any claim to God’s favor and clings to the mercy of God. He does not compare himself to anyone. He does not brag of any accomplishment. In humility, he comes before God to seek the grace he needs to live. Jesus declares that this unrighteous tax collector finds mercy and goes away justified while the righteous Pharisee goes away just as alone and isolated as he was when he came. The sad thing is that the Pharisee doesn’t even seem to realize just how far from God he is. God brings down the proud and lifts up the humble.

To the Pharisee, righteousness is achieved through obedience to the law in all its demands and details. To Jesus, righteousness comes through trusting in the mercy of God. To the Pharisee, righteousness is an achievement. To Jesus righteousness is a gift. To be righteous is to be in a right relationship with God. The righteousness of God is God’s mercy freely given to the waiting sinner. Paul says in Romans that we have been brought into a right relationship with God through the saving death of Jesus Christ. We receive this gift of God’s grace through faith. Righteousness is a relationship that God establishes and God maintains. Paul writes in Romans, “It is God who justifies, who is to condemn?” The Pharisee in the parable tries to justify himself by condemning others. True righteousness compels us to reach out to others with the same grace, mercy and love that God has shown us. The righteous find themselves at peace with God and at peace with others. It is no wonder that Jesus links together our love for God with our love for the neighbor. When we know that it is God’s loving kindness that justifies us, then we want to practice loving kindness toward others.

Something strange happens to us when we hear this parable. The minute we hear the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we are moved to say, “Thank God, I am not like that Pharisee.” In saying those words, I realize that I have become the very thing I reject. I have set myself over against someone else. The parable ends with an inescapable “gotcha.” We face the temptation of feeling superior to those who are struggling to find the way or whose faith may not be like our own. The parable calls us again and again to remember that we have peace with God because of God’s mercy and God’s mercy alone.

Thirty years ago, Glide United Methodist Church in San Francisco was a dying urban church. Over the past 30 years, God has brought new life to the church as the people have reached out to the poor, to the hungry, to the spiritually broken, to street people, to prostitutes and to crack addicts. Through its vital but controversial ministry, Glide is seeking to build a church without walls. Several years ago, a member of our

congregation was in San Francisco and went to worship at Glide Church. When the choir entered the sanctuary full of people, she was astonished to see that there were all the different kinds of people in the choir. Some folks in the choir looked like they were sick with full blown AIDS; others seemed unwashed and poorly dressed; some were dressed in garish clothes and heavy make-up; still others looked well dressed and affluent. For a moment she was taken aback by this strange mix of people, she heard a voice as clear as a bell say, "These are my children." The righteous are those who know God's mercy and share it with others.

In Flannery O'Connor's short story *Revelation*, the main character Mrs. Turpin is in a doctor's waiting room contemplating the ways of God. She is thinking about how blessed she is that God had made her the way she is. God has given her husband Claud and her the standing they enjoy. They have a house and a piece of land large enough for raising hogs and a bit of cotton. She is certainly ahead of all blacks, white trash and those who only have houses and no land. She struggles with where to put nice people who have lost their money and property and people who have new money and no class on the ladder of respectability. Her thoughts burst forth into an exclamation, "If it's one thing I am, it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!' It could have been different! ... Oh thank you, Jesus, thank you!"

A thoroughly unpleasant young college student named Mary Grace throws a book entitled *Human Development* at Mrs. Turpin and hits her squarely in the forehead. To make matters worse, Mary Grace calls Mrs. Turpin a wart hog from hell. The moment becomes an unpleasant revelation for Mrs. Turpin as she begins to contemplate her view of God and the world. Surely God's grace is for good folk like Claud and herself. In the end of the story, a thoroughly shaken Mrs. Turpin looking out from her pig parlor sees a vision in a crimson streak against the darkening sky:

She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were tumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black[s]...in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces even their virtues were being burned away... In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.

The righteous are those who recognize their own unrighteousness and who rejoice in the mercy of God. In spite of what Mrs. Turpin thought, righteousness is not about

“good order and common sense and respectable behavior.” The righteous are those who have learned how to quit comparing themselves to others and quit condemning others. The righteous are those who have learned to spend their time on important things like welcoming the outcasts and loving those who are hard to love. The righteous have learned how to laugh and cry and sing “hallelujah” even if they do sing off key. The righteous have learned how to give with a glad and generous heart. The righteous are those who are truly free because they have found their peace in God that enables them to live in peace with others. True righteousness builds a community of faith that is based on grace and grace alone.

Maybe *righteousness* is not such a bad word after all.