

"Live Right, Do Right"

Psalm 112:1-6; James 1:19-27

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 15, 2018 – 7th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Throughout the Bible we come frequently across the word “right” and its derivations: upright and righteous. They all stem from a Latin word *rectus*, which means straight. Something that is right, therefore, does not bend. It does not deviate from the proper path, but stays straight on.

When the Scriptures talk about a righteous person they most often mean one who avoids doing wrong. Especially in the New Testament, and building on the teachings of Jesus, we find a proactive sense to this word as well. The righteous person is one who doesn't condone evil, loves what is good, and attempts to live by God's will. He or she does not just avoid wrong, but steps up in life to do right.

James puts it well when he says: "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves... not those who merely listen but those who put their faith into practice—for they will be blessed."

There's a story about a small girl whose brother made a trap to catch sparrows. She felt sorry for the little birds and prayed every night for his scheme to fail. One day she looked less worried, so much so that her sister asked, "Julia, why are you so sure that your prayer will be answered?" The little girl smiled and said, "I know that my prayer is answered because I went out this morning and kicked the trap to pieces."

To be righteous is to live right and do right. It is to care for widows and orphans, as James suggests, but these are just examples of things that might be done rather than a complete list. To live right and do right is to become aware of needs around you and then to respond. To live right and do right is to be aware of things that are wrong and do something about it.

Jesus summarized all the commandments into love God and to love your neighbor as yourselves. He could have said love God and keep out of trouble, but he didn't. He made it clear that to be a disciple of his is to put your faith in action; anything less is to miss God's intention. To be righteous is to live right and do right.

Now I can say that I love God and love people. Lots of people do. Bold statements are easy to make. Carrying through on them, however, is a good deal harder. And you just can't choose one or the other, God or neighbor; you have to love both and do it in a tangible way. It comes down to this: a person of faith has to learn to act on her words or there is no credibility in discipleship.

James carries this thought further in his letter and attempts to make it even clearer. "What good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions don't prove it? Can that kind of faith save you?"

Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is it in saying to them, 'God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!' if you don't help them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: professing it without acting is a dead faith."

"But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have actions.' But show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith through my actions."

To believe is to act; to love is to care. James tells us we have to do what we say or what we say will be meaningless. Worship and action are inseparable. One can't find its fulfillment without the other.

It takes two to tango, as the old song reminds us. So why should this be any different? Jesus was quite intentional when he said to love God and to love your neighbor. He could have included one and not the other, but then it wouldn't work. It has to be all or nothing. Faith and action are inseparably linked.

Some years back PBS aired a documentary called *Weapons of the Spirit*. This was a story of courage and conviction from WWII and, through the film, made a whole new generation aware of it. It centered around a small village in France and, more particularly, its church. Through the parishioners' actions the lives of innumerable Jews were saved from the gas chamber, and they did it under the very nose of the collaborators in the Vichy government.

These humble people of faith made a straightforward decision. It was intentional, though not the result of extended debate. What they did was so much a part of what they believed, that it did not need to be argued. They simply acted in accord with their faith and despite personal danger.

President Obama, in one of his Holocaust remembrances, made reference to this collective act of love and courage when he said : "In the moral accounting of the Holocaust, as we reckon with numbers like 6 million...we also remember the number 5,000 -- the number of Jews rescued by the villagers of Le Chambon, France -- one life saved for each of its 5,000 residents. Not a single Jew who came there was turned away, or turned in. But it was not until decades later that the villagers spoke of what they had done—and even then, only reluctantly."

In hiding and sheltering innocent men, women, and children from the occupation soldiers, the villagers gave a gift of life to those who were in imminent danger. Their actions stand out in stark contrast to the specter of death which was so prevalent during those trying days.

One old woman from that village, who was interviewed on the program, seemed to be surprised that they might be considered heroes. She said, "We can't understand the fuss. In the Bible it is written to feed the hungry, to visit the sick. That is a normal thing to do."

Ah, yes, but does that mean to put oneself in danger to hide and protect others? Does it mean to lay your own life on the line to keep strangers from certain arrest and execution? This is surely more than feeding the hungry and visiting the sick. It's more than caring for orphans and widows. It is acting courageously on faith, despite the risk that comes with it.

Today, when we look at what's happening around us in America and around the world, we can easily feel helpless to effect change. The problems here and around the globe are so immense, so complex, that it may seem as if there's nothing we can do. It's only a small step, then, to become resigned to doing nothing.

We pray for peace, but then are content to let others figure out how to bring it about. We lament the problems of our young people, and hope the schools will take care of them. We see injustice perpetrated, but shrug our shoulders and change the channel. Even closer to home, we may be concerned with the well-being of some of our fellow church members, but take no personal responsibility to show them we care.

But surely God will understand why we failed to act:

"I was concerned, Lord, but I didn't know what to do."

"I wanted to do something, but I didn't know how."

"I thought about it often, but it seemed like there was never a good time."

"The problem is so big, and I'm only one person."

"I know the needs of those people, but I have problems, too."

I don't think the words of scripture today are intended as a put-down, but they do strive to kick start our faith into action. They confront us and wake us up to the truth there must be continuity between what we profess and what we practice. God loves our words, but treasures our deeds even more. God values prayers of adoration, but truly delights in our reaching out to others.

The righteous persons described in our Psalm and Epistle readings for this morning are those who live right and do right. They are people who give freely and learn that instead of emptying their cup in doing so, their cup overflows. They are people who understand that while God expects much from us, God always gives back even more generously.

Hear again the words of the psalmist in this morning's reading. They particularly stand out in another translation: "Happy are those who revere God and delight in doing the Lord's will. Abundance will fill their houses, as gratitude fills their hearts."

Today let me give you the entire gospel message in just four words. If you can put them into practice, you'll do fine. Here they are again: *Live right; Do right*. Now that's simple enough. *Live right; Do right*. Can you say them with me? *Live right; Do right*.

Commit yourself to living by those four words and let me know sometime how you're doing. No, on second thought, you don't have to let me know. If that is the faith you practice, I'll know it and it will be obvious and everyone else will know it, too.

God wants your love, but it's hollow love without genuine care and concern about others turned into action. Because we may not be able to do everything, it doesn't mean that we can't do something. Show love in whatever ways you can. Follow in Christ's example.