

Sermon for Ash Wednesday 6 p.m. 17 February 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore 21214
Scriptures: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17 (785: Response 1); 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Righteousness”

This year, the word “righteousness” came to me to place over the Ash Wednesday service.

What does it mean to be righteous?

The texts are familiar to us. Joel, who emphasizes religious acts and may have been a priest himself, reminds us of the usefulness of formal acts to grow in honesty spiritually. It is a good thing, but still jarring for some of us elderly, lifelong Methodists, to place ashes on our foreheads and even to go through six weeks of somberness. We’re learning, and gaining in fellowship with our more formal fellow Christians. In some way, form can be of God in the work of becoming righteous.

David, of course, stands out for us in the psalm, with its clear tradition of being his response to being confronted by the prophet Nathan for his dreadful abuse of kingly power over Bathsheba and her rightful husband. Thus the act of repentance, so basic to both the good news of Jesus and the experience of Israel, is brought home to us this first day of Lent. Righteousness is surely part of our life of faith, and righteousness never stands without repentance, day by day.

Paul’s reminder that our faith in Christ is fundamentally a reconciliation ... and one not of our own doing, but God’s gift, completes our surrounding scriptures before the Gospel reading.

So, the stage is set: But now I go to personal experience. Every other week I get to place a quotation on the bulletin board outside our church, and last Monday, in the cold and wet, I headed out with what I felt was an excellent quotation, short enough to include a line about tonight’s service. It was cold going, and the quotation was almost too long... but I worked, and shivered, and placed almost all the words ... and as I did so, I realized my quotation was actually an ego trip to make a point with some others whose Bible interpretation differs with mine. I went ahead, and almost finished, thinking I’d decide whether to keep my point-making quotation after I saw it in full. But wait ... I needed two more letter “n’s” than we had in the box!

So, the short of it is, all there is on our bulletin board tonight is , Ash Wed. 6 p.m. online.”

So much for righteousness. Maybe I’m too literal in things, but to me I was being shown the main point of Jesus’ quotation for Ash Wednesday, which warns us not to exhibit our piety.

Why is Jesus so strong on this point? Your guess is as good as mine ... but for me, I was being taught, once more, that it is not MY job to win arguments over Bible verses, but rather God’s gift to use scripture, and worship, and fellowship, all in the service of love.

Righteousness, indeed! There's a verse in Psalm 42 that says no one is righteous before God. For me, God's word is the last word, once more ... and I am learning again about honest believing, and humble sharing of sense with others without being ever too certain of my own motives ...

Please join me in thanking God for doing the righteousness work, both in and through and over and under my own motives and actions.

Let us begin a holy Lent together.

Amen.