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Romans 5:12-18 & 6:1b-11

Sermon

This week we continue our study of Romans and a discussion of Community with the help of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We are diving into some of the finer details, the nitty gritty, of what exactly makes our faith community work. What makes this a Righteous Community... what makes us, Righteous? What is our core identity and how does it relate us to each other?

First, I want to pick up with the definition of Righteousness Rev. Amy used last week. The term invokes the image of a Holy Roller or someone who keeps to a strict moral code. We perhaps would use the term to describe those persons who follow all the rules, never sin, and are without fault. Thinking about it, I have never used the term Righteous to describe a person because the definition in our common vernacular create a Righteous person into something that doesn't actually exist. It creates some ideal of religious perfection for which we strive but is forever out of reach. If I do use the word, I slap it on someone in a negative sense, someone who is self-righteous... conceited and narcissistic, someone full of themselves and selfish. Not exactly the righteousness we are looking for.

Instead, Righteousness, as the Apostle Paul would have you understand it, is an action of God, an ongoing fulfillment of God's promises for us. It is a constant reminder of God's love and mercy acted out in and for us. It's a verb of God's actions. But it's not only something God does... it is absolutely something we are expected to do.

We begin our own deep dive into our own Righteousness by examining Romans 5 and 6. The texts we read today get into Original Sin and how it has affected us, along with how the righteous acts of Christ's crucifixion has overturned it. Original Sin is not the most popular of topics in modern church but understanding its pull on your life is pretty essential to understanding who exactly you are in the Christian Community.

Most of us are familiar with the story that Adam and Eve, against God's wishes, ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In eating from this tree they disobeyed God. But the issue is not just that there was a rule and they broke it. It really comes down to the idea that they thought they knew better, and trusted themselves, and the serpent, more than they trusted God. It was a selfish act. In so doing, this one trespass, as Paul calls it, would allow death to hold dominion over us.

Original Sin, or Natural Sin as John Wesley would call it, is that innate nature within each of us. It is selfish desire; it is the Total Depravity of the Human Condition as John Calvin would describe. God created us in God's perfect image, but we and the rest of creation were distorted, fallen, and broken by Original Sin. Now, Humanism... bucks against this idea, it argues that all humans are innately good at heart and that humans will work towards the good of the whole. I know I'm coming off dark here, but have you heard this mask debate? We'll only

help others as long as it doesn't make the individual uncomfortable. Or, my favorite example, ask any parent of a 2 year old if they think Original Sin is real... no one has to teach a child how to steal, horde, and pitch selfish tantrums... no you have to teach them to share and consider others.

This is important because it changes how you approach the world. If I believe humans are innately good and capable of good action on their own, then I will rely on my own human self to solve my problems and find my own deliverance. I am the master of my fate and my own work results in my own reward. You may find that this sounds oddly familiar... a radical individualism that emphasizes the ability of one to deliver one's self. I'm not so certain Paul would approve.

However, if one understands that they are incapable of lifting themselves out from their own depravity or fallen nature, then they may see and act differently. Salvation will require a connection to something or someone else, it will require trust and relationship with another. Instead of independence, the reliance on self, we might be instead interdependent, self-sufficient yet dependent on others for something more. Martin Luther would describe it as an "Alien Righteousness," a deliverance that does not come from within oneself, but from without. This Righteousness from outside us is the free gift of grace from Jesus Christ. And this gift breaks the power of sin, stripping the judgement of original sin from us. We are no longer punished, in accepting the grace and love of Jesus Christ, for that which we had no choice. "Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation of all, so one man's (Jesus Christ) act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all."

Paul continues in chapter 6 of Romans with the question, as I paraphrase it, "Oh, so if all sin is forgiven, can't we do whatever want?" Ummmm... no. In fact, that defeats the purpose, Paul says, "How can we who have died to sin keep on living it?" "The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Paul is telling us, as members of the church, that we must first accept that we need help from outside our own powers and that in accepting this help, we must be changed. Christ justified us, wiping away the taint of original sin in his death on the cross... so too must we die to sin. We must give up that way of life that is selfish, self-centered, and relies solely on ourselves and instead embrace a life in relationship with God and one another.

Martin Luther in his sermon entitled, "Two Kinds of Righteousness" would describe it thus, "Proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works, in the first place, in slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to self." He would continue... "Therefore (Proper Righteousness) hates itself and loves its neighbor; it does not seek its own good, but that of another, and in this its whole way of living consists. For in that it hates itself and does not seek its own, it crucifies the flesh. Because it seeks the good of another, it works love. Thus in each sphere it does God's will, living soberly with self, justly with neighbor, and devoutly toward God." (*Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* p136)

We accept that our Salvation comes from Christ first... and in so doing, we are driven to live out that Salvation for others. Now what does all this thick meaty Apostle Paul and Martin Luther Theology have to do with our Christian community? I'll refer back to Bonhoeffer, "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ."

Christians are not who we once were. I am no longer, Daniel son of Daniel son of Joseph son of... its goes on a while until we hit just decide to say... son of Adam. In my acceptance of God's grace and love, that me has died. Instead I live a new life in Jesus Christ. I am Daniel son of God, brother of Jesus, a co-heir with Christ in all of God's Kingdom. And all this is possible not because I have made it so, it was not me that chose to believe in Jesus Christ first... God chose me at creation, in the death on the cross, in the moment of resurrection, I'm just merely waking up to that fact and living life now, everything before was sleep, was death.

But how did I come to know about God's love for me? There were hints of the Holy Spirit moving through life, blessings known and unknown that I perhaps attributed to God or others. I may have "KNOWN" of God but still not believed. No I met Christ through another, many others in fact. There was a pastor named Harry, some college kids named Pete and Will, about a thousand women named Kathy (My home church literally had like 10 Kathys in it... it was crazy). This is what Bonhoeffer is getting at when he talks about a community that is through Christ and in Christ.

I cannot come to know who Jesus is without someone else showing me, telling me, guiding me, essentially getting in a relationship with me and literally sharing the good news that God loves me. And others cannot know about the Jesus Christ unless I accept that I cannot save myself and am in need of that alien righteousness. It's a little bit of a circle. We need others to know Jesus and we need Jesus to be in relationship with others. Part of the mystery of faith but also part of that practical reality that this is a process both on a personal level and a communal one.

This is what defines the community of faith. This is what will be the foundation that withstands the storm. Who are we Grace Church? Who are we United Methodists? Who are we Christians?

Are we a collection of people who like the same music and worship style, find it beautiful and moving? That's not Righteousness, that's consumer entertainment.

Are we a group that enjoys helping others, handing out school supplies and food bags? That's all well and good, but not a righteous community, just a volunteer group that will blow away in the wind.

Are we a gathering of likeminded persons, mostly progressive, who live in a similar area, suburban Baltimore, and live mostly at the same level: middle-upper class, and mostly look the same: White? This is the true identity of most churches, a mostly homogenous demographic collective. Absolutely nothing righteous here, just social tribal laziness.

Are we a global organization that spends its money and its time bickering over money, policies, and upholding the status quo? Doesn't seem righteous.

If this is going to work... this thing we call church... whether it's a small group meeting or it's the entire universal Christian church the world over, we have to be about one thing, nothing more and nothing less. Jesus Christ.

“Keeping Jesus at the center.” It's a common enough phrase tossed around, but what does that even mean? Well, we'll spend some weeks in Romans discussing that, and Bonhoeffer will tell us how both private and community prayer and life build on it. But the question I want you to leave today asking, or maybe a few questions...

When was the last time you talked about faith, Jesus... God, with someone else? Have you done it today? This week? Month? Since the Pandemic started? This year? Ever?

Is this really the center of who you are? This church and Jesus thing? If you're not talking about it, then my guess... it's not. And for this community to work, we need it to be important. It has to be the thing that holds us together. This is where Righteousness comes from. Holding Jesus Christ at the center of who I am as an individual and who we are as a community. That Righteousness will push us to have the great music and go the good mission projects and so forth. But all those things are meaningless without that Righteousness through Faith at the core.

Maybe you're not feeling that Righteousness right now... you have some doubts, some struggles, and feel a big burden of sin on you these days. Good news, as Bonhoeffer says, “God's word in Jesus Christ pronounces [you] not guilty and righteous, even when [you] do not feel that [you] are righteous at all.” And I encourage you to call someone from this church, or another brother or sister in Jesus Christ and talk about it! Because it's important! And if you are feeling that strong faith in Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer has news for you too, “[You] know that God's Word in Jesus Christ pronounces you guilty, even when [you] do not feel [your] guilt.” Humble yourself and call someone from the church or anyone really and listen first, then share God's love second. We need to connect to each other, and not just through superficial love of music or convenient geography, economics, or demographics... no through an actual spiritual connection built upon and through Jesus Christ.

This is who we are to be and this is how we are to do it. “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.”