

Psalm 112:1, 4-9 ~ Matthew 6:25-34

The Paths of Righteousness

9th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Installation of Ruling Elder ~ July 21, 2024

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Introduction to Scripture

Anybody bring a worry or two with you here this morning? What are your top two or three? If you are a list person, you probably have your worries carefully ordered, color-coded, hoping to check them off, one by one. If lists aren't your thing, your worries may be freer floating, swirling, spiraling. Whatever worries may be on your hearts, and however you wear them: Jesus has a word for you today. It starts with "do not worry" and he says it more than once. To help you notice how often he makes his point here, I invite you to take out a pencil or pen right now and as I read this text, circle each time you see the word "worry" or some form of the word "worry" in Matthew 6:25-34. This scripture lesson comes from the heart of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew chapters 5 – 7. Are you ready? Here we go.

Sermon

How many times did Jesus tell us not to worry about our lives in the text? ... That's right: 6 times in 10 verses. So, how is that "do not worry" advice going for us? As Jesus finished this particular riff to a mixed crowd of tired, troubled, broken-down folk: "Do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." True in the 1st century Galilee and today in our 21st century troubles: here in our hearts, and families, in our community and country and all around the world. Let's begin by asking ourselves anew about these troubles in this way. *What is breaking your heart about this world right now?* Think about that for a moment, "what is breaking your heart about this world right now?"

Just maybe, you thought of political polarization, the Presidential election, gun violence, climate change...and many more. We are facing looming challenges we are leaving to the next generation to deal with. We are so inundated everyday by so much that seems so wrong, so heartbreaking, we are tempted to just say, "that's awful" and move on. Or we are afraid to get "too political" and fear what damage could be done if we talked about it with family and close friends whose politics differ from our own. However, I hear God imploring us to have these conversations because the next question God is asking us to engage, after naming what is breaking our heart right now about this world is this: What am I going to do about it? What are we going to do about it?

Jesus has given us our marching orders. Jesus has told us what to do right here in this scripture lesson. The turn he made in his preaching to the crowd on the hill. He didn't just say, "Don't worry....be happy." Rather he said: "Don't worry – *be righteous*." He implores them to redirect all that worry energy into something else. He how we all strive for something. He says, striving is good. But redirect your striving to God's kingdom. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness." That's right, that big fat "R" word, God's righteousness, and all that other stuff will be taken care of. You may be thinking, "Great, but what does "God's righteousness" really mean?" Bingo!

That's our question of the day, which I am preaching on in response to a robust, important conversation that occurred at a *Forum For All* back on April 28 led by our Outreach Committee. This Forum was motivated by the need to clarify what it means to us to be a "Matthew 25 church." We committed to being a "Matthew 25 church" back in 2019. You have heard me refer to it often from the pulpit. And you may have scratched your head to try and remember what that means. It's a big, bold vision that isn't so easy to remember. A challenge that the Outreach Committee has taken on to help us understand and be able to articulate to others.

Here it is: being a Matthew 25 church (as described by our denomination) calls us to focus on three ways to strive first for kingdom of God: to build congregational vitality; to dismantle structural racism; and to eradicate systemic poverty. This vision in three parts, was inspired and informed by Jesus' parable in Matthew 25:31-46. The one about the sheep and the goats. You may recall, it turns out well for the sheep. Not so much for the goats. Yes, that one. So, the Forum back in April began with the ancient spiritual listening practice, *Lectio Divina*, or Divine Reading, in which we listen to a scripture and notice what we notice. What jumped out, what shimmered as we read it slowly, not once, but four times, opening our minds and hearts to let the Spirit speak to us. And that day the "r" word, righteous jumped out at some of them.

I will remind you, the sheep in the parable stood for the righteous people who fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and the goats stood for the people who did not do these things? Jesus called them "accursed." And then Jesus surprised them, blew them out of the water, I'm guessing, when he said that doing these things, when did or not do these things, like welcoming the stranger, they were welcoming or not welcoming him. The Christ. You know, as creative and inventive as Jesus was, his use of the word "righteous" in this parable was as traditional, core, Jewish theology as it gets.

Jesus was indeed drawing from the deep well of his own Jewish tradition. How do we know this? The Hebrew word *tsedek*, which means "righteous" occurs 525 times in the Old Testament! It is a major throughline throughout the Hebrew Bible and on through Jesus' teaching and interpretation thereof. This word, *tsedek*, meant something very specific to the people of Israel. And it may not be what you think or comes to mind when you hear the word "righteous." Which is also sometimes rendered "godly" as it is in some English translations of our Bible. Some of the participants in the Forum that day visibly recoiled from that word. And being FPC folk, 😊thankfully, spoke up to share their discomfort around that word.

You don't hear those words, either "righteous" or "godly" too often these days except in the context of something usually negative. Like: "There she goes again being so self-righteous." We think or say this when someone is being judgmental or looking down on another person or group. When have you heard the word "godly?" I remember hearing it (especially back when I was a teenager) used to describe a certain kind of woman, a "godly Christian woman" code for a woman who conforms to a narrow band of womanhood restricted to the traditional roles of women, the 3 k's as termed in Germany: "Kinder, Kuchen, and Kirche" (children, kitchen and

church). As much as God loves and I love children, cooking, and church, we believe here that there are multiple ways of being righteous for people of all genders. Nor was that narrow definition what Jesus' crowd on the mountain that day thought of when they heard the word "righteousness."

Here goes my quick rehab for this beautiful word, "righteous." Good time to listen up, because striving first for God's kingdom and God's righteousness, *is* the way out of spiraling worry! It calls us to the center of whom God calls us to be as individuals and as a church. Being righteous means to be in "right relationship" with God, humans, and all of creation. In that "right relationship" we are motivated, empowered to do the right thing. To place the interests of all above own's own desires. Righteous people seek to live in community in order to sustain and promote the well-being of the community and of all God's community.

I'm going to bring this idea down to size with a story from the Desert Monastics who lived in the third century in Egypt. A little story more than 1800 years old that illuminates the message, "Don't worry—be righteous!" It is important for you to know that monastics at the time supported themselves in large part by weaving baskets from reeds. The story goes like this, "One brother, when he had finished his baskets and put handles on them, heard the monk next door saying, 'What shall I do? The trader is coming, and I don't have handles to put on my baskets.' Then the first brother took the handles off his own baskets and brought them to his neighbor, saying, 'Look, I have these left over. Why don't you put them on your baskets?' And he made his brother's work complete, as there was need, leaving his own unfinished."ⁱ

This story reveals an approach to life which is rare in our world today. Jesus taught us, as his tradition taught him: God's original covenant widens our lens. Looking through God's eyes as best we can, calls us to keep opening the aperture more widely until we see that only when the whole community, the whole world is fed and housed and safe is our work really finished on earth." Righteous work. To which God employs and deploys us. To which Jesus commanded us in his last parable in Matthew 25.

Where are the pathways of righteousness leading us now? God is calling on us to do something new, something different. Together. We start by noticing and asking important questions. Then talking to determine what we are going to do about it. When people are sleeping on the streets in metro stations; when the back seat of a car is a child's bed, it is the righteous who must ask, *Why?* God calls us to follow the Gospel into this situation, now. When we undermine and stress our delicate ecosystem with—air pollution, deforestation, and toxic waste—resulting in famine, displacement, and poverty around the globe for people who had nothing to do with its causes, the righteous must ask, "How did our today become more important than God's tomorrow for all God's people?"ⁱⁱ

Last week, CrowdStrike, a cybersecurity giant, caused what may have been the largest IT outage in history. Caused, as I understand it, from an issue with a single software update. This outage grounded multiple major airlines; thousands of flights world-wide. It halted medical

procedures in hospitals, banking systems, transit systems, access to 911 around the nation and the world. What strikes me about this worldwide snarl caused by something so seemingly harmless and every day, are two things: (1) How deeply interconnected and interdependent we are. And (2) how vulnerable our systems, designed with profitability as the bottom line and therefore with a minimum of redundancy, truly are. A news report used the term, “single point failure” to describe this breakdown. This tech meltdown.

Beloved Community, sometimes we forget how interdependent and vulnerable we are. Always have been, always will. We were reminded this week by that single tech breakdown. Yet, this is how our Creator designed us and this beautiful world we get to live in. Truth is God put all of us earthlings in one basket. And calls us to share basket handles, to give a hand, to open our hands and hearts. Striving first and foremost for God’s kingdom, God’s righteous and justice. We are called to shine with that single point of Light: Christ’s unfailing love, and to hear this call of Jesus: Don’t worry—Be righteous. Amen.

ⁱ Joan Chittister, *The Monastic Heart: 50 Simple Practices for a Contemplative and Fulfilling Life*, (Convergent: New York, NY, 2021), pp. 137-8.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p.135.