

Practicing Righteousness

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The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Holy Communion

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Isaiah 58:1-12; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Matthew 5:13-20

“Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness. . . .” -- Isaiah 58:2

I suspect most of you know the answer to that old question, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” Practice, practice.

Anyone who’s played an instrument knows that if you want to play it well, you have to practice. You have to practice scales, you have to practice fingering, and you have to practice the passages in the music that trip you up. Musicians know a lot about practice.

So do athletes. For every shot that goes in the basket or every kick that goes through the goal posts, there are hundreds or thousands of practice shots or kicks that miss the mark, and even the most naturally gifted athlete or musician knows that their edge of excellence dulls without practice. The pianist Vladimir Horowitz is supposed to have said to an interviewer that if he went one day without practicing, he could tell it, if he went two days without practicing, the critics could tell it, and if he went three days without practicing, the audience could tell it. And Horowitz was, by any measure, one of the greatest pianists in history.

I’m reminded of the importance of practice when I read passages in Scripture such as that fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah, from which this morning’s text is taken, “Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness. . . .”

Now it would be both tempting and easy to lay into all of you, representing a nation that thinks it practices righteousness, as Isaiah laid into the Israelites. The opening verses of that fifty-eighth chapter that Amy read for us a little while ago are quintessential prophetic scorn. Isaiah is pouring invective on the Israelites who are whining because God isn’t giving them what they want in return for their sham piety. “Why do we fast, but you do not see?” the Israelites ask God. “Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Well, here’s the reason, Isaiah says: You serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. You call that a fast? The fast that the God of justice asks for?

The Israelites, like so many religious people before and since, have confused the form of religion with its substance, and are expecting the forms to do in the absence of the substance. Jesus later will use the image of whitewashed tombs to make the same point to the leaders of the same people in response to the same problem.

There’s a difference between practicing righteousness and practicing piety, and religious people are always vulnerable to that confusion. There’s nothing wrong with piety, of course – coming to church, reading your Bible, saying your prayers, fasting, lighting candles, and so forth – but piety can never be a substitute for righteousness, just as charity can never be a substitute for justice. The difference isn’t simply one of degree

– that piety and charity are simply the “lite” versions of religion and justice – but rather it’s a difference of understanding, orientation, and commitment.

The reason the prophet Isaiah is upbraiding his co-religionists, as scholars might say, is because they are refusing to connect the dots between the relatively easy acts of devotion – participating in worship, observing personal rituals, and so forth – with the much harder acts of devotion, which have to do with ordering one’s life and one’s society in alignment with the will of the God of justice, righteousness, and peace. You may find it tough, as I do sometimes, to get out of bed on Sunday mornings in time for church, but that’s relatively easy compared to trying to get the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund ordered in such a way that great numbers of the world’s poor people aren’t condemned forever to live indebted to the rich people like us.

It’s a serious temptation to pray for the poor rather than work for the poor. It’s a serious temptation to have a Bible study about Jesus’ healing of the paralytic instead of devoting your life to the healing arts or volunteering what precious free time we have to a hospital or clinic. It’s a serious temptation to say that Jesus calls us but we’ll get back to him on that.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, saying, “And lead us not into temptation,” I don’t think he had Internet pornography in mind. I think, rather, he was telling us to ask God all the time to give us the grace to resist the temptation to substitute piety for faith, charity for justice, and symbolism for substance.

And just as no one plays at Carnegie Hall the day after they pick up the violin, so none of us gets the life of faith right the first time. It takes practice. That’s why the Christian tradition has developed, over the centuries, a variety of activities that we call spiritual practices. Letting Scripture seep into your life and inform your actions. Living in such a way that you let God, rather than the Internet or what’s coming from the radio or a big-screen TV, determine your priorities. Opening your eyes and mind and heart and hands to the world that is God’s gift and calling, rather than following the crowd who says that the world is a place we should fear and try to control.

What we do here on Sunday morning is important in the life of faith, and I don’t want to suggest otherwise. And yes, we do need people to show up. But I hope I’ve made it clear over the years of our being together that the ministry of this church on Sunday morning is meant, in its every feature and facet, to help you do better and more easily and more joyfully and more gratefully and more gracefully the various ministries in which all of you are engaged when you’re not here. And I know you are, and I give thanks, every single day, that you are, because that’s where righteousness, true righteousness, is practiced.

The older I get and the longer I work with the church, the more I’m convinced that we are most righteous when we are least conscious of being so, when our left hand doesn’t know what our right hand is doing. When living for God and for God’s world – letting justice guide how we earn and spend our money, letting peace reign in our hearts as well as in our homes and world, letting the Spirit rather than our impulses or our culture be our guide – when all of that is as natural to us as breathing in and out, then we’re practicing righteousness.