

Psalm 118:1-9 and Hebrews 13:1-8
“What does righteousness look like?”

As the lay reader was reading that Psalm I couldn't help but think of what would it sound like if we did a call and response just like verses 2-4, where the author says: Let Israel say, and you would respond, His steadfast love endures forever. Let FPC say, His steadfast love endures for women. Let the women say, His steadfast love endures forever. Let the men say, his steadfast love endures forever. This is a call and a response that reinforces in all of us the steadfast love of God and as Paul tells us in Romans, if God is for us, who can be against us? What can happen in this world that could ever shake our faith in God and cause us to act and react in ways that go against what God has taught us because we have failed to believe in the steadfast love of God.

Can death, or life, or angels, or rulers, or things present, or things to come, or powers, or height, or depth, or anything else in all creation be able to separate us from the love of God? No, well then, we have to live as if we believe it. Our trust in God must translate to a way of life that is clearly seen once we leave this building. This last chapter of Hebrews in which we find ourselves launches us into the world after 12 chapters of being told over and over again that in Jesus we have a new covenant. As a result of this new covenant that has come about because of the blood of Jesus on the cross, we now have direct access to God through his sacrifice and his resurrection. If we believe this, if Jesus is our Lord and Savior, then, the author of Hebrews states, this is what your life ought to look like.

READ

You know, sometimes we really try to do the right thing and say the right thing but it all comes out wrong. I met with a member of this church this week and they've been going through a pretty tough time lately. We had a great lunch and just sat and talked and it was really, really nice. I know I left that time with them feeling grateful that God had brought us together, and when I got home the person texted me and you can tell that they texted it by voice, and the text said: Thank you again for lunch. It was nice to have lunch with my bastard and even nicer to have lunch with my friend. Thank you. Right away he texted back and said, I mean pastor. He tried, it is the thought that counts. We want to say and do the right thing but sometimes things beyond our control get in the way.

Up to now we have been pretty thick in the theology of Jesus and what it means that we have a new covenant with Jesus. The author has called it a better covenant because each one of

us has a personal relationship with Jesus that ensures salvation and launches us into the kingdom of God. But we are not in the kingdom of God right now, so the question comes up, what does righteousness look like right now? What does acting according to the will of God look like right now?

Today the author gives us some really basic how to's in our life, a bit of a moral code by which to live by. We begin confirmation this Sunday and we have a good group of 7th graders who hopefully are eager to learn more about their own faith in Jesus. But when you are that age, and even now most of us, just want to be told what to do. Don't make me think too much, tell me what I believe and tell me what to do and then I can just put it into practice. You know me, I'm not that kind of a pastor. I like to put before you what Scripture says and then make you make up your own mind as to whether you are living out the promises that Jesus wants for you, or if you are just following your own desires and wishes.

This chapter is a bit of a confirmation class how to with some very specific guidelines on what do you have to do once you are a disciple of Jesus. He begins in vs.1 with a word that we are very familiar with that doesn't come out in the English. Someone read it to me: Here it is in Greek - Ἡ φιλαδελφία μενέτω. What word sounds familiar to you in that first verse? That's right, Philadelphia, which means brotherly love, we see that same word in I Thessalonians 4:9, and Romans 12:10, and II Peter 1:7. It isn't by chance that the author begins this listing of what is important to do once you know Jesus with the reminder to love one another.

And how exactly are we supposed to love one another? He continues that thought in vs. 2, show hospitality to strangers. You have heard me say repeatedly that as a nation we are failing badly in this area. In my enews this week I described how we are failing in our own neighborhood. Pastor Molis Augustave in York was here legally because the United States at one time saw it wise to allow people who were in war torn areas and where there was violence that unhinged to allow those fleeing those areas protective status here in the United States as they looked to be integrated.

This was welcoming the stranger, even if it was a government allowing graciously people to enter because their life was in danger, this could be say that it is clearly welcoming the stranger. Recently this status was lifted and those who came from Haiti, a war torn, gang plagued, one of the most dangerous places to be on the face of this planet, were deported back to meet certain abuse, torture, and even death. It isn't just random people, and Pastor Molis from

York who had a family and kids who remained here because they were US citizens, was deported, forced on a plane and flown back after years of living here in the US. This is not showing hospitality to strangers. God is not pleased and those who carried out this act, from the top to the bottom, will be judged, as we will be judged for our actions as well.

The church has always understood what radical hospitality to the stranger looks like. In the 3rd century we find in writings of the church the following: If a destitute man or woman, either a local person or a traveler, arrives unexpectedly, especially one of older years, and there is no place, you, bishop, make such a place with all your heart, even if you yourself should sit on the ground. Instead people of the church, disciples of Jesus who are content with their own salvation support putting up walls and sending people out because we are driven by selfishness and not by Jesus. This is where what we do outside of these walls has to reflect what we learn and what do inside of these walls.

The author of Hebrews moves on from welcoming the stranger to two topics that are interconnected in much of Scripture: sexual immorality and greed. Remember, the title of our sermon today is what does righteousness look like and the author gives us a how to in areas of our life that are relevant to us even today, including sexual immorality and greed. Those two things, those two areas of downfall in life, have not changed over time, which is why it is good to address it today as well. When we find ourselves caught up in either of those it is a reflection of selfishness as well. We don't trust in the steadfast love of the Lord and so we turn to that which we believe will provide a quick fix to my current situation.

Love is not love, no matter what people tell you. We can be destroyed as much by love as we can by hate. Loving the wrong person, what the author calls fornication or adultery, and loving the wrong things, greed, is a step to our downfall. This is not what righteousness looks like. Love of money is centered around the fear of abandonment as is sexual immorality. For the love of money when Jesus grasps our one hand it frees us to open up the clenched other one and let our resources go for his kingdom. The love of money and trust in God are mutually exclusive as Jesus teaches us in Matthew 6:25-34 where we are encouraged not to worry about material things, because the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

Respect for marriage and for the physical intimacy integral to marriage is an essential aspect of the pursuit of holiness to which the community has been called by God. Conversely, sexual immorality is actually a rejection of the presence and goodness of God who created the

human family in its maleness and femaleness. The writer warns that those who place personal gratification above responsibility to God and to the community will encounter God as judge.

Today we have addressed a couple things that allows us to see what righteousness looks like because they were covered by the author in Hebrews. Does it amaze you as it does me, that the topics that were addressed two thousand years ago still apply to us today, we are still getting them wrong and so we need to hear them again and again to remind us that loving Jesus actually means that we have to love our neighbor in ways that make us sometimes feel uncomfortable?

God has promised that I will never leave you or forsake you. But for some of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus we feel the need to lean into money, or sex, or fear of the stranger, or racism. There is no room in the body of Christ for those who would see themselves as followers of Jesus and yet feel the need to band together as a race to protect ourselves from other races. Who does that? Those who are selfish and love themselves more than they love God.

The author ends this section with the statement: Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. No matter what is happening in the world around us it does not give us license to close the door on the stranger, to ignore those in prison, to underplay marriage, to value money over relationships. Jesus is the same and his expectations for us as people who pursue righteousness remains the same.

It is assumed that the church is a caring fellowship who is eager to be in partnership with those who are mistreated and on the margins of society. That is what righteousness looks like, it has always looked like that.