

All Saints Episcopal Church

By the Rev. Justin R. Cannon August 28, 2016

You Are Called To Be Righteous, Not Self-Righteous

I'd like to entitle today's sermon: you are called to be righteous, not self-righteous.

Today's Gospel lesson reminding me of this story I was emailed some time ago:

Pastor Jeremiah Steepok transformed himself into a homeless person and went to the 10,000 member church that he was to be introduced as the head pastor at that morning. He walked around his soon to be church for 30 minutes while it was filling with people for service . . . only 3 people out of the 7-10,000 people said hello to him. He asked people for change to buy food . . . NO ONE in the church gave him change. He went into the sanctuary to sit down in the front of the church and was asked by the ushers if he would please sit in the back. He greeted people to be greeted back with stares and dirty looks, with people looking down on him and judging him.

As he sat in the back of the church, he listened to the church announcements and such. When all that was done, the elders went up and were excited to introduce the new pastor of the church to the congregation . . . "We would like to introduce to you Pastor Jeremiah Steepok" . . . The congregation looked around clapping with joy and anticipation . . . The homeless man sitting in the back stood up . . . and started walking down the aisle . . . the clapping stopped with ALL eyes on him . . . he walked up the altar and took the microphone from the elders (who were in on this) and paused for a moment . . . then he recited

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?

When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

After he recited this, he looked towards the congregation and told them all what he had experienced that morning . . . many began to cry and many heads were bowed in embarrassment.

--

Like many posts of this nature I get in my email or I see on Facebook, I always check them out one snopes.com to see if they are legitimate and true. While thought provoking, nobody has identified as pastor named Jeremiah Steepok, nor has anyone been able to verify the event described. That doesn't really mean much to me, since most stories preachers share aren't real stories — like many of Jesus' parables — but researching this story of Pastor Jeremiah led me to a real account from an occurrence in November 2013 in Taylorsville, Utah:

"Members of a Mormon congregation in the Salt Lake City suburb encountered someone they thought was a homeless man at church on Sunday. What they did not know was the man was a bishop for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

At least five people asked David Musselman to leave the church property in Taylorsville, some gave him money and most were indifferent.

He said he disguised himself as a homeless man to teach his congregation a lesson about compassion. To make his appearance more convincing, he contacted a Salt Lake City makeup artist to transform his familiar face to that of a stranger not even his family recognized.

"The main thing I was trying to get across was we don't need to be so quick to judge," Musselman said.

He received varied reactions to his appearance at church, he said.

"Many actually went out of their way to purposefully ignore me, and they wouldn't even make eye contact," he said. "I'd approach them and say, 'Happy Thanksgiving.' Many of them I wouldn't ask for any food or any kind

of money, and their inability to even acknowledge me being there was very surprising.”

Bishop Musselman told only his second counselor that he would be disguised as a homeless man. The bishop purposefully walked to the front of the chapel and sat in the front row at the beginning of sacrament meeting. After his counselor’s talk, the bishop had his counselor lean forward over the stand and ask if he could say a few words . . .”

Don’t be surprised if I’m not here next Sunday and you find some new disheveled guy here in the pews. You can see, though, how these stories came to mind as I considered today’s Gospel lesson. It’s quite a fascinating account, though. Jesus is invited to an important meal. By now he’s begun to establish a reputation as both a revered teacher, a knowledgeable rabbi, but also somewhat of a rebel — healing on the Sabbath and the like. Nonetheless, to not invite this famed rabbi to the party would not have been fitting, so Jesus shows up, but we are told they were watching him closely. Perhaps whomever was throwing this dinner — the governor, or chief priest, or a politician wanted a chance to judge for himself this man of whom people are talking.

Jesus arrives, and upon entering the room surveys the crowd, noticing immediately people’s self-inflation and clamoring for attention, for prominence, and recognition. Perhaps they are all gravitating for a seat next to the host of the event, or next to the most prominent dignitaries, and I suspect Jesus is trying to figure out where to sit himself. Does he sit up near the prominent leaders, or does he sit in the back next to the blacksmith, the innkeeper, and those of more lowly status. I doubt he’s be bothered sitting with the latter, but instead he confronts these people’s ego-centered approach to this party, basically conveying to them — it’s not all about you. After this little lesson on holding one’s ego in check, Jesus turns to the host and admonishes him for just inviting friends and dignitaries, saying, “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” You can see how those earlier stories came to mind when I was meditating on this Gospel.

Mind you, he said the resurrection of the righteous, not the self righteous, and therein lies the key to this Gospel lesson. It would be oversimplifying to say this Gospel lesson is all about confronting the ego-- a reminder that it’s not all

about you. That's true, but Jesus takes it further in calling us to righteousness. The two parts of this Gospel lesson are two parts of the whole. The first part is: it's not all about you. The second part is: you are called to be righteous. There's a big difference between righteousness and self-righteousness.

In Hebrews chapter 12 verse 14 it is written, "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." Holiness, righteousness, sanctification — these all describe the heart of the Christian journey. Time for a little word study, because no sermon of mind is complete without a little Greek:

The word "righteous" in Greek is *dikaïos* (dik-ay-yos) and describes that which is in conformity to God's own being (God's will and God's ways).

Righteousness, as one goal of the Christian journey, is the conforming of our lives — how we live, how we treat people, what we prioritize and value-- to the priorities of God. The pursuit of righteousness is the path towards holiness. As much as we talk about God being holy, you and I are actually called to be holy. The word "holy" in Greek is *agios* (ag-ee-os) and literally means set apart or different, in that we are different from the world. A 1st century temple was *agios* because it was different from other buildings. The ways of the Gospel call us to values and ways of living in the world that are not always the priorities and ways of the world. The Gospel message clashes with the world's ways in valuing humility over power, compassion over correctness, and human dignity over rules and statues. And in pursuing these values we pursue the path of righteousness, which is not about us, but about paving the path to the Kingdom with acts of mercy.

"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind." Throughout the Gospels, God shows special concern for those who are downtrodden, outcast, and marginalized. Our salvation is tied in not lifting ourselves up by our own bootstraps but by the conforming of our hearts to the heart of God, such that the suffering of any becomes the concern of all. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said, "You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him." That is righteousness, indeed the goal of our Christian journey.

© The Rev. Justin R. Cannon