

A Righteous Man

When I contemplate the incarnation in Jesus Christ, it seems to me that *humanity* matters a great deal to God. Indeed, the incarnation tell us that humanity is God's ultimate goal for the creature God made; the fulfillment of God's creative purpose for the species homo sapiens. The world is better off when we understand what it means to be *human*.

The world is better off when we see that God wants far more from us than simply to follow the rules and show up in church from time to time. God has grand plans for us; God believes that we can be truly *human*.

Humankind exists not to be functionaries, but to live into the fullness of our potential – indeed, Frederick Buechner captures this in a paragraph on *mystery* where he writes, “There are [other] mysteries which do not conceal a truth to think your way to but whose truth is itself the mystery. The mystery of yourself, for example. The more you try to fathom it, the more fathomless it is revealed to be. No matter how much of yourself you are able to objectify and examine, the quintessential, living part of yourself will always elude you, i.e., the part that is conducting the examination. Thus you do not solve the mystery, you live the mystery. And you do that not by fully knowing yourself, but by fully *being* yourself.”¹

And yet when it comes to faith, it seems there is a conspiracy at times to make it very easy to get all the rules right and miss the humanity.

We all need reminding of the basic dignity of human beings. We need reminding of it when there is a very real tendency towards finding ourselves in solo siloes made up of folks who agree with everything we say. (Hint, that's what makes it a solo silo.)

We need reminding of the basic dignity of human beings when our own self-image takes a tailspin and we see not the shared DNA of humankind that God took on in Jesus Christ, but numbers: numbers like our salaries, or our weight, or our functions.

We need reminding of the basic dignity of human beings when so much threatens to divide us from one another, to keep us from understanding one another and ourselves.

I had lunch a while back with an old friend, a classmate from High School. We had lost touch years before but we reconnected when we both lived in Atlanta and she came to church I served there one time before moving to another city. I was able to recommend a church to her in her new city and she wound up joining the church I recommended.

Anyway, we've kept in touch since then and we had a wonderful conversation, partly the

¹ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC. (HarperOne, NY, 1993) p76

sort of stuff you do when you see an old classmate, rehashing memories and finding out who kept up with whom, but then the conversation took an interesting turn toward faith. My friend is a woman of deep faith and, I don't think she'd mind me sharing this, she lives it out by getting her preaching in one congregation, attending classes at another, and finally hearing her praise music, because that's what she loves, at still a third church. But what fascinated me was the broad cross-section of the religious landscape that was represented by her moveable feast of faith. In short, the preaching was mainline, the classes were new age, and the music was evangelical. And that's when she said something that told me she knew this was fascinating also. She said, "I find I have to make sure I use the right language at the right place. People look at you funny sometimes if you say 'God' and 'Jesus Christ,' in the one place, but substitute 'creator' and 'the divine' and all of the sudden, everything falls into place."

I replied, "Yes, change the words, and at the end of the day everyone is looking for redemption and meaning."

How often do you find that to be true? Or perhaps it is a permutation on it that holds our ultimate common ground, "meaning and love," or "love and redemption."

At its heart, the experience of being human is simply the experience of *being*, indeed, even *being* as an act of Holy Communion in which human and divine come together.

At its best that is what religion does.

Sometimes I think that Matthew's Gospel represents an intersection of religion and humanity.

Certainly it represents an intersection of faith practice and humanity.

When Joseph resolves to divorce Mary quietly, it is an intersection of religion and humanity.

I have heard for many years that Joseph was a righteous man. That's the description our Bibles here in the church use for him, *a righteous man*. I was curious what that meant, so I went back to the Greek of the New Testament to see if the word itself could lend an insight. And it does. It's δικαίος, and it translates literally, *being just*.

Her husband, Joseph, being just and unwilling to hold her up to public shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

And here, Matthew's choice of words is very interesting, because righteousness was defined by being *just*, and everything that is wrapped up in being δικαίος is defined by *adherence to the Law*.

Do you catch the distinction?

Remember, in Matthew's Gospel, the Law never goes away, not one jot or tittle. Heaven and earth may pass away, but the Law seeks not abolition but *fulfillment*. It is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but it doesn't cease to be.

So here at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, what it means to be *just*, to be *righteous*, what it means to be δικαιοσ has to be defined.

To keep the *law* meant he must divorce her. Joseph resolved to do so, perhaps with sadness, but he resolved nonetheless.

I so suspect it was with sadness, as he didn't have the stomach to put her to shame with a public stoning. But make no mistake about it, at the time of Jesus, to be righteous is to be under the Law. The Law includes Leviticus. Leviticus has strict instructions about what to do with such women as Mary: unmarried and pregnant.

Religious people frequently seem to have hang-ups about sex and pregnancy and the like, have you ever noticed?

The first time I preached on this text, my mother said to me, "Can you even say *pregnant* in church, don't you have to use some euphemism like, "Great with Child?"

Understand Mary's situation for what it was: unmarried and pregnant in a world that was unkind to that.

And Joseph knows, one cannot *play* at righteousness. One does, or one does not; there is no *try*.

What a terrible choice.

And of course, in comes the angel.

Do you know what an angel is?

An angel is a messenger.

Have you ever noticed how it always starts, think about the shepherds in the fields, what does the angel say?

"Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy."

Here it is in Matthew, "Do not be afraid."

Do not be afraid to take Mary for your wife.

Do not be afraid – how often do those words show up in the Bible at the moment of maximum fear?

This situation clearly calls for panic!

Do not be afraid, righteous one, for God is in this.

With these words the angel heralds grace, because they come at the intersection of Joseph's religion and his humanity. They come at the intersection of justice and righteousness. They come at the new beginning and they are words of grace because what the angel asks Joseph to do is going to take him way off the roadmap for being a δικαιοσ.

Never again can *righteousness* be objective, because this is no blind justice, this is God's justice.

This is justice that takes into account the situation.

This is justice that looks for humanity and sees image of God in humankind.

And grace follows grace.

Suddenly, Joseph is forced to look at what it means to be a righteous man. He is brought face to face with his own humanity, and Mary's... all in a dream.

Joseph awoke from the dream and did as he was told.

It sounds simple, but make no mistake about it, this is a costly grace.

If we're honest, I've never liked the beginning of Matthew. Luke's version is practically enveloped in golden glow, with shepherds abiding in their fields by night and angels singing "Gloria in excelsis deo," and swaddling clothes and the manger.

Matthew's version gives us the Magi, to be sure, but it also gives us Herod, and the Magi returning to their home by another way, before the king flies into a murderous rage. Thus, Joseph and Mary do not return to Nazareth, but make their home in Egypt for a season.

This is a grace that costs the righteous one: Childish religion redefined, home redefined – all in service of God's plan for humanity and for this human in particular.

I suppose this is the grace that one can barely even stop to examine – to fathom it is to see its fathomlessness. It can only be lived. It can only be received.

Oh yes, Joseph walked headlong into the intersection of his religion and his humanity.

Let me ask you a question: What would you do if an Angel of the Lord appeared to you? (Remember, an angel is just a messenger.)

What if a messenger showed you a dream that brought you to the intersection of your religion and your humanity?

When have you broken from what you were taught in order to be faithful to God's call on your life?

No, Matthew's Gospel is not my favorite version of the Christmas story – no matter where you worship, I dare say you won't hear that version on Christmas Eve. You might get one or two Christmas cards with camel silhouettes on them, but aside from that, very little of that version of the Christmas story will be suitable for family viewing. It's a hard story, filled with doubt and great deal of fear.

But sometimes it is the hardest stories that are the most filled with grace.

I believe that's true – it's not the people we look past without seeing them that change us.

It's not the questions whose answers are easy to get at that pierce deeply into us.

It's not the rulebook of religion that will crack open our hearts to let God's grace flow in.

No, it's the flesh and blood that God took on, from cradle to cross, every minute of it costly, every minute of it grace, that can move us from *examining* to *being*, and in being, to find communion with one another and with God.

It's almost Christmas. And perhaps, if we're very lucky, this Christmas leaves us examining our humanity.

Perhaps it leaves us rethinking *righteousness*.

Perhaps Christmas gives us the chance to look for humanity in others and even to see it anew in ourselves.

And maybe, that will leave us less afraid – but maybe it will open us to fears we never dared to face?

If any of these are true, we're in good company.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.