

Living Together in Righteousness

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Psalm 119:33-40; Matthew 18:15-20
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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This past Wednesday in our weekly Wednesday Bible study, one of the participants described the portion of Psalm 119 that Pam just read for us as a “seeker prayer.” It is the prayer of someone who is seeking after God’s wisdom, seeking after God’s help, seeking after God’s presence. “Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,” “Lead me in the path of your commandments,” “Turn my heart to your decrees,” “Turn my eyes away from looking at vanities, worthless things,” “Turn away the disgrace that I dread,” “I long for your precepts.” You can feel the yearning in these words, and I know from conversations I’ve had with many of you, that you know exactly this kind of longing. It is a longing to know what the right thing to do is, it’s a hunger for knowing that you’re not alone in your struggles, that God is with you and with your loved ones when you’re going through a tough time.

The little section from Psalm 119 closes with these words: “In your righteousness give me life.” The way the psalmist, and the Bible generally, understands things is that righteousness is not something we humans do on our own, righteousness does not start with humans at all, but rather, righteousness emanates from God’s heart. God’s heart is righteous, and what our little verse teaches us is that God’s “righteousness” is not about rules or regulations or policies. God’s righteousness is not about adhering to some strict code of conduct. *God’s righteousness is about giving life to yearning people.* God’s righteousness is about relationship, relationship with us that gives us life. If that’s the case for God’s righteousness, then it follows that our righteousness is also not primarily about rule-following, checking off boxes of moral performance, but rather our righteousness also has to do with being in relationship, in relationship with God and with our neighbors in ways that gives life.

When we put Psalm 119 together with our gospel reading from Matthew 18, what we see is that God’s righteousness is not only about us as individuals. God’s righteousness defines our life together as a community. The Bible is not obsessed with individualism the way our society and world are. The Bible knows that individuals are part of a wider community, a village, a fellowship, a neighborhood, in which we find our security, our identity, and our future. And the Bible is not naïve about the challenges of living in a community; the Bible knows that communities get broken and hurt by the behavior of the individuals within them, and so the Bible provides guidelines and processes for restoring the health and wholeness of the community. “If another member of the church sins against you,” Matthew 18:15 reads, “hop on social media and drag their name through the mud.”

Oh wait. That's not what it says. "If another member of the church sins against you, have the courage and the maturity and the grace to go and talk about their sin when the two of you are alone. And if that doesn't work, you still don't get to hop on social media about it, you are to take 2 or 3 witnesses, mature people who are there, not to take sides in the dispute, but to hold the well-being of the community for you all and see if you can regain and restore the relationship. And if that doesn't work, a broken relationship has an impact on the well-being of the entire church, so the entire church has a stake in your working this out. And if the community is not able to help you work it out, then you are to relate to them as a Gentile and a tax collector."

For a long time, I read this as giving the person 3 chances to be set right, before they became like a Gentile and a tax collector, which I basically thought meant to cast them out into the outer darkness, where you could finally talk about how awful they were. But then someone pointed out that, in the gospel narratives, Jesus has a special concern for Gentiles and for tax collectors. They are the special recipients of his mercy. So even after it is necessary for the health of the community for there to be a separation from the person, you are still to view them as the recipients of God's mercy and salvation.

We are in this together, through God's righteousness.

In the last couple of months, I feel like I have been coming across a lot of articles and op-eds in various newspapers and magazines about the loneliness and isolation of our society. Multiple writers have given voice to the ways that so many people in our society feel disconnected from other people, feel that others don't really know who they are, that they only have surface-level relationships with people, and how they are starving for human connection. The Covid pandemic exacerbated these tendencies, but these tendencies did not start with Covid. Social media, among other things, has also been proven to be an accelerator of our isolation from each other, at any deep level.

Several of these op-eds have pointed out that participation in a church community could provide an antidote for these feelings of disconnection, which has been encouraging to see. But several of these essays have struck me as having a tone of resignation, as if to say, "We have this massive problem of social fragmentation and isolation, where people of all ages – young people, middle-aged people, older people – feel fragmented, isolated, stressed out and alone. Churches could be places to help address this – as places of gathering, connection, support, help, and making meaning. "But, the articles go on to suggest, sounding as if they are throwing their hands up in the air, "no one wants to go to church anymore, so what are we to do?"

My sense is that times like these, times in which there is a loss of human connection, a heightened degree of polarization, and a widespread temptation towards the impulse to exert control over people, are times that create a calling for

congregations like Lewinsville Presbyterian Church. There is a contemporary missional purpose for congregations that yearn to be communities of connection, engagement, thoughtful love for an interpretation of the Bible, avoiding the traps of a rigidly literal use of the Bible on the one hand, or a cavalier, cynical dismissal of the Bible on the other, navigating our way through the polarizations of our time by keeping our eyes on the well-being of the poor and the most vulnerable. At our best, that's who Lewinsville Presbyterian has been for 175 years.

"In your righteousness, give me life," the psalmist writes. God's life-giving righteousness is experienced powerfully in the life of local congregations. Psalm 119 and Matthew 18 make it clear that being part of a community of faith is no picnic. Sin and disagreement and annoyance and irritation are part of the life of every congregation, just as much as they are part of every human family. But sin is never the strongest force in any situation; the grace of Jesus Christ, received and expressed and embodied in the life of local congregations, is entirely sufficient for dealing with our sin.

Friends, today's Engagement Fair offers a wild variety of ways for you to participate in the life of this congregation. I hope you'll walk around the main floor after worship today. Throughout the main floor, you will find volunteers standing at different tables to talk about their ministries, with which you can connect and get involved. Participation in the life of this congregation and inviting your neighbors to participate in the life of this congregation, can be a way that we can be part of God's mission to weave a new social tapestry of joy, justice, peacefulness, humility, and love. To God and to God alone, be all the glory, honor, and praise, now and forever. Amen.