



Roanoke, Virginia

August 15, 2021

“Right”

or

“The Wrongness of Being Right”

Genesis 1:31a, Psalm 133, Luke 7:36-50

George C. Anderson

Last Sunday, my sermon title was “Wrong,”
and we considered what it means to be wrong.
Today, my sermon title is “Right,”
and I want us to consider what it means to be right.
I’ll warn you, though,
in thinking about being right,
it is easy to get stuck.

Listen for the never stuck Word of God in the reading of our three passages.

Genesis 1:31a:

³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Psalm 133:

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!

²It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.



³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

Luke 7:36-50

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." ⁴⁰ Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." ⁴¹ "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." ⁴⁸ Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

"What does it mean to be right?"

In the competitive family I grew up in, the stakes were always high, especially among us boys. Whenever we disagreed about what was true, it got intense because it mattered *a great deal* who was right.

- Of the identical twins we knew, who was born first, and which sister has the mole on her back?
- Is a football really made with pigskin?
- What's more poisonous, a rattle snake or a black widow spider?
- Who gets the bigger slice of pie?
- If you keep your eyes crossed, will they freeze in place?
- If you swallow gum, will it stay in your stomach for seven years?

All these questions led to impassioned arguments with the goal being to decide who is right and *who is stupid*. (We measured the pieces of pie!) You could count on this line being said in every debate: "Prove it." And if the matter ever got resolved, this line was always said: "I told you so."



So, in answering the question, “what does it mean to be right?”, we have to begin with being factually right.

This sounds simple, but it often is not because, as I said last Sunday, who is wrong and who is right quickly becomes an issue of identity:
who is smart and who is an idiot?

That is immature for children when the issues are not that important and dangerous for everyone when the truth at hand does matter.

In school,

your grades depend on being correct.

In life,

the IRS genuinely cares how much you make
and what you have deducted.

Vote totals matter

as to who won an election.

It is important to know how viruses spread,
and how they can be avoided.

Whether accusations about others are true or false
can save lives or ruin them.

People have been lynched,
mobs have rioted, and
countries have invaded

based on evidence that later turned out to be not true.

So, facts matter. Because “a lie travels faster than the truth,” and because facts so easily are ignored when they are inconvenient, I’m a big fan of fact checks. In this age of internet and cable news, with so many scams and spins to confuse us, I’m grateful for those sites that check the accuracy of the shocking things we are told...whether trivial or serious. You can go to good sites and find out

- if there is a secret restaurant at Disney (there is),
- if Marie Antoinette really said, “[Let them eat cake!](#)” (She didn’t)
- or if alligators live in NY sewers. (Sort of true, a few pets are rescued from sewers every year)

You can check about things that really matter too.

- Can what seems to be an accidental payment to your Venmo account be a scam? (Yes!)
- Should you trust an email from me saying I need you to purchase gift cards for someone with cancer? (No!)
- Should you believe a recorded message that
 - your Social Security number has been suspended,



- or free money is available if you'll only claim it,
- or that, because of suspicious activity, a warrant has been issued for your arrest... that you can have resolved with a phone call?
 - No, No, and No!

You can check if the accusations of commentators, politicians, journalists, and preachers really are true. Every Sunday, I write a sermon that you can fact check. In my printed sermon, I offer a couple of dependable sites).¹

It is shocking how much you can put to rest with a little objective research. You might even learn how much of your time has been wasted by those who are spinning nonsense. I don't know if you've noticed, but for a long time- all through human history in fact- liars tell lies to cover up lies. (Feel free to fact check that).

So, the beginning of an answer to the question, “[What does it mean to be right?](#)” is getting the facts right.

But let's *not get stuck* there. When Millie and I pack for a trip together, I need a bigger suitcase. Our understanding of what is right needs to be bigger than just containing the idea that it means being accurate with facts and information.

One way, the faith tradition has expanded the definition is to come up with a bigger word to contain it. The faith tradition expanded the word “right” to “righteousness.” The old English word ‘wis’ was combined with “right.” “Wis” can mean “being sure,” but it also can mean “a manner of acting” —which is to say that— “righteousness” means “right living.” It is about ethics. It is about morality.

It is this sense of being right in which the Bible is most interested.

Sometimes Christians spend a great deal of time arguing about facts-

was the world created in six days?

did Jesus really spend three days in Hell?

did Noah ride in the ark?

did Jonah ride in the whale?

did Constantine really convert to Christianity?

did 3000 really convert after Peter preached on Pentecost?

The Hebrew and Christian scriptures are more interested in right living than right facts. Think about it. Sure, the stories and history of the Hebrew Scriptures provide the framework for volumes of material about righteousness, about the right and wrong ways of doing...of living.

To be righteous is

to work and then to rest,

to worship and then to serve,

to do those things that please God

¹ Two sites: PolitiFact.com, Snopes.com



and not do those things that God forbids-
kill, steal, and lie.

There are
foods to eat and foods to shun, and
right and wrong ways to worship.

It goes on and on and on...
and some of it is clearly not of our times,
and some of it should not have been justified then.

Regardless, the underlying concern is to describe how to live as God's people in a world that did not always want God's people to live (it turns out that all people are God's people, but you get my point).

The New Testament is not all that different in that righteousness remains a huge consideration.

Jesus gives the demanding Sermon on the Mount,
and he tells his disciples to pay attention
to what people do more than to what they say.
Even his miracles end with his telling the people he heals *what to do*:
Go to the priest,
sin no more,
get up and walk....

I'm amazed that people spend so much time debating Pauline theology when Paul himself seems so obsessed with what he thinks needs to be done

build communities of faith,
reconcile divides,
and make a witness to God's grace in the world.

I could go on- don't forget the letter of James ("[Faith without works is dead.](#)")

But I am afraid I lost you back when I first said the word, "*righteousness.*" "Righteousness" is not a word we like hearing. That suitcase has become so battered and dirty that most of us don't want to take it on the journey of our lives. "Righteousness" brings to mind that other meaning of the old English word, "wis," which is "to be sure." Too many people are a bit *too sure* about what everyone else is supposed to be doing.

In fact, we have expanded the word again to describe them: "Righteous" becomes "Self-Righteous." I am self-righteous when my beliefs or actions have more value than your beliefs or actions *simply because they are mine.*

We find the self-righteous in our Gospel story.



But before I talk about them, let me say that sometimes the self-righteous is not “them” but “us.” The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were concerned about what we all should be concerned about, and that is how to live lives that please God. But *the particular Pharisees* of our story, in *that particular moment*, go too far. They are too concerned by their own fixed code that they miss a growth moment.

One of them has invited Jesus and other Pharisee friends into his home. They have a meal that, given the context of the story, is probably where most meals were held at that time: in the open air. The conversation with the visiting rabbi will certainly be on the interpretation of the Torah and others are invited to gather at the edges to listen in...though passively so the adults in the room can have the conversation.

But not everyone is welcome. Not someone like the woman who is so excited about Jesus that she intrudes on the inner circle. She is known to be a sinner—someone accused of having done some things that have given her the kind of reputation where she should be the *first to know*—that this is not where she belongs. Let’s not be naïve. First, the passage is probably talking about her being known for violating sexual norms and, second, we don’t even know if the accusations are true.

But in she comes. That’s rude.

And looks what she does. She washes Jesus’ feet. That’s not scandalous in and of itself, because feet-washing for people walking dusty roads in sandals is required etiquette. But an unclean woman should not be cleaning a rabbi’s feet. She should not be *kissing* Jesus’ feet. She should not be rubbing Jesus’ feet with expensive oil...with tears. If she’s upset- at what she has done or what she is said to have done- then she needs to deal with it away from here.

She *really does violate rules* about the right and wrong way of doing things. But *to get stuck* in her surface acts of impropriety can do harm. Last Sunday, I said that because human fallibility makes growth and discovery possible, there is a certain *rightness to being wrong*. Well, these Pharisees show that there can be a certain *wrongness to being right*.

Jesus sees what the Pharisees do not see and that is the potential of the moment. He doesn’t see a sinner to be shunned but a person wanting to be healed within herself, and within the community.

Jesus knows that when it comes to being right, you can get stuck not only in what is factually right, but also stuck in rules about what is right. Boundaries are important. Boundaries might be as stressed today by both conservatives and progressives within their own cultures as they are in Jesus’ day. Jesus does something that shocks conservatives and progressives alike: he defends behavior that is *culturally wrong* because he *sees a person who wants to be right*.

“*Be right*,” not “*do right*.” What Jesus says of the woman is in keeping with what God says of creation.

God says of creation,

“**It is good.**”

Jesus says of what the woman has done,

“**She is good.**”



What he says is, “**You are saved. Now go in peace.**”

Now we widen again what the word “Right” means. Last Sunday, I said that “*there is more to being wrong than what the Prayers of Confession has to say.*” Well, the same thing is true about being right. *There is more to being right than doing what is right.* It is about *being right* with oneself, with one another, with God.

The word Jesus uses to contain that added meaning of being right is “shalom,” or “peace.” Shalom is the rightness of harmony. It is a state of being.

Which is not to say that shalom is *static*.

Many times, harmony requires getting the facts right.

Many times, harmony requires that we do things to fix what is broken,
to heal what is divided.

Many times, harmony requires the work of
compassion,
justice and
reconciliation

But shalom speaks not only to what we strive for,
But also, to what was true at the beginning:
the inherent goodness of life,
and of life together.

Let’s slow down. I want to end with a meditation on Psalm 133. The Psalm began:

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!

That can be a celebration of fact by the psalmist or an aspirational goal, but either way, it is a description of life as being... as it was in mythic memory and as it is meant to be in hopeful imagination.

The psalmist goes on. The psalmist goes on to say that there is something precious about a world at rest

Neighbors who get along,
Families not quarrelling,
A world without war,
Living and then dying without regret.

How precious is it?

²It is, the psalmist says,
like the *precious oil* on the head,
running down upon the beard (of Aaron),



At that dinner, Jesus might add, “like precious oil mixed with tears and rubbed on the feet of a rabbi by someone whose heart and life is already being healed in this moment of faith in God’s abundant grace.”

In the Pharisees’ eyes, the woman is stuck in their definition of what is right. In Jesus’ eyes, she is not stuck. She is liberated.

So, what does it mean to be right?

Get the facts right?

Yes.

Do what is right?

Yes, that too.

Finding peace and being right?

Goodness, if I could have that- if our world could have that- I’d have tears to mix with my oil as well.

