

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 The Meaning of Righteousness
Matthew 5:1-12, Psalm 15, Micah 5:89
February 2, 2020

I have watched with interest some of the happenings in the world over the last week or two:

1 - Last Sunday, about the time we were all leaving church to go home, the well-known former basketball player Kobe Bryant was killed, along with 8 others including his 13-year-old daughter, in a tragic helicopter accident. He and the others were on their way to a youth basketball game in which the teenage girls were set to play.

2 - In China, there is a growing epidemic of what is called the "coronavirus," a flu-like illness that in this strain is very contagious and deadly. The entire city of Wuhan has been placed under quarantine to prevent its further spread. Wuhan turns out to be a very large city, larger than any American city, with 19 million people in its metropolitan area. The economic impact felt by shutting down business and restricting travel caused the stock market to go down several hundred points.

3 - And of course, there is the impeachment trial of President Trump. Most of my friends are on one side or the other and believe that some tragedy will befall America if their side doesn't win. I am more concerned about both the political and religious divide that this impeachment represents, and from which it results.

"The American people" . . . is an epithet one hears from both sides, and from the media, as if there is such thing. It seems clear to me that no such characterization is accurate. The American people do not speak as a group. About half interpret things one way and about half the other. They do not all share the same interpretation, not only as Americans, but as American Christians.

There is a big disagreement about the situation, and a lack of trust and a low regard for those of the other persuasion. These are symptoms of a deeper problem. No matter how things turn out, half the country is going to be disappointed.

4 - Down in Australia, where they concluded today their national tennis championship, this is the 50th anniversary of the last time an Australian woman won all four major championships in a single year. Her name is Margaret Court. One of the stadiums at the big tennis center where the tournament is played in Melbourne is named after her. She also has won more championships than any other person, Serena Williams is one behind her.

She is a controversial figure. She is a pentecostal preacher who in the past supported the Apartheid regime in South Africa and is stridently anti-gay, which sets her against the sensibilities of many contemporary tennis players and fellow Australians. Because of her views, some disagreed with the honor bestowed on her at this year's tournament, some advocate that the stadium be renamed. And all of this

happened in the wake of severe out-of-control fires that have been raging in Australia for several weeks. It is estimated that one billion animals and their habitats have been destroyed.

Biblical Teaching

What does the Bible teach about how to live in a world characterized by these things? A single line from the minor prophet Micah is a good place to start:

“To live justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God, this is what the Lord requires of us.”

All three of these requirements are more easily said than done. It is no surprise that people disagree about the specifics. Sometimes the disagreements bring people into direct conflict with one another. Ironically, people often ignore the demands because of the conflict. More often these demands shine the light on human failures, bringing people into direct conflict with themselves, and into the awareness of a conflict with God.

The 15th psalm, read here today, asks the question, “who may dwell in your sanctuary, and live on your holy hill?” And the answer is like the great text from Micah, it sounds like it makes sense until under closer scrutiny, one realizes how very demanding it is;

“The one whose walk (life) is blameless, and who does what is righteous; who speaks the truth from his heart. And has no slander on his tongue, who does his

neighbor no wrong and casts no slurs on other people, who despises the vile person (if it is possible to accurately determine just who the vile person is) but honors those who fear the Lord; who keeps his oath, even when it hurts, who lends his money without usury, and does not accept a bribe against the innocent.

The person who does these things will never be shaken.”

While I am not sure about the intent of this psalm in its original context, I am sure that in ours it conjures up an image of a perfect person that in real life simply does not exist. To “act justly,” in all our actions, and in every one of life’s circumstances, is simply beyond our reach.

That is why, of course, the next requirement is to love mercy, and the next is to walk humbly with God. The other texts we have read today, the ones from the New Testament, also speak the same message.

The Beatitudes ask us to value humility, and meekness, and to take note of those who suffer, especially those who suffer because of righteousness. They ask us to live lives of sacrificial service and peacemaking in a world of excess and strife.

We are presented with a set of values that contradict the other values the world teaches, that we should be self-concerned and seek pleasure and wealth and independence, and power; values that hold up

success, and pride, as the characteristics of a meaningful life.

And there is the great text from Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians, where the great Christian apostle sets forth a comparison between divine and earthly wisdom, with the conclusion being that what *seems* to make sense when seen through the eyes of the culture, is in reality flipped on its head.

Cross Wisdom

The wisdom of the cross say about all of this strife? It is possible that some of you want me to stand up here and proclaim correct answers, so that you will know how to feel and what to think. Others of you would be angry if I did that. I would be angry too.

What is clear is that love and sacrifice and service are the highest values we have in our faith tradition and sacrificial love requires that we be heartbroken, or at least concerned about things;

For those who are bereaved, both the ones we know about, like Kobe Bryant's family, and the ones we don't know, the ones closer to home.

For those threatened by disease, any disease, including those affected by the coronavirus epidemic.

Heartbroken over the battles we face, in which we come to demonize and vilify our neighbors, instead of loving them unconditionally.

Over the divides that separate us, even the religious divides, the ones that make us think that we are right. Being right is not all that it is cracked up to be. People have a funny way of figuring out how to *get "being right" wrong*, by using it to harm and punish, and tear down.

We should stare long and hard into the picture of Jesus on the cross that sets itself in our minds and won't let go. We can seek humility and embrace our grief instead of avoiding it. We can seek meekness, hunger and thirst for righteousness, and purity of heart, and at the same time, mercy and peace, crossing the divides. And we can stop complaining about the honor of being persecuted, blessed when insulted, and slandered, and refuse to persecute and slander others.

Rejoice and be glad because God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, God's weakness stronger than human strength, and that through the ordinary people of the world, like you and me, because of the miracle of grace, grace that like God's peace surpasses understanding, God is bringing to the world of tragic deaths and social strife, of epidemics and raging fires holiness, righteousness and redemption. That is what cross wisdom means.

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