

RIGHT, CORRECT, NO, RIGHT

Sermon by Walter G. Edmonds

Damascus United Methodist Church

I Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Eph. 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost – August 16, 2009

This week, beginning last Sunday when Peggy and I came home from happily being with my sister-in-law and brother-in-law, Anne and Dave Cowburn at their lake house on Kerr Lake, Virginia, has been rather unusual. First of all, there was a message from Herb Hess from Haddonfield, New Jersey, a man that's nearly fifty years old, who was in my youth choir over thirty years ago. He was just checking up on the Edmonds' and remembering our great summer times at Ocean City, New Jersey. Getting our mail after a two week hiatus, there was a birthday card from my college and seminary roommate Ron Krauss, whom some of you met in Hamden, Connecticut, on tour. The card's sentiments were simply, "At our age a birthday is about helping each other keep our stories straight. Thanks for the memories whatever they were. Happy birthday!"

On Wednesday, I went to see Joe Rice, son of the Joe Rice who purchased our organ in 1960 from Metropolitan United Methodist Church. Joe was in Shady Grove Hospital recovering well from a stroke that he had last week. We had not talked since the 175th celebration of Damascus Church, seven years ago. Needing to get a new security identification nametag I was sent to the chaplains' office in the portable. The African American man who greeted me and filled out my papers said, "I used to work in your education building in the 90's, and I painted the large room upstairs blue when we had offices there, and I remember you." In getting my parking card stamped for the new parking arrangement at the hospital, the woman looked at me and said. "I know you. My sister Marian Weirouch from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, comes with her sons to your church in Damascus when she's visiting, and I come with them." Thursday, Virginia Stubbs, daughter of Darlene Stubbs whom Damascus Church, Healthy Choices, and Harwood House helped immensely a half decade ago, called to say that she just wanted to hear my voice and tell me she and her mom needed prayers. And on Thursday night, Marcia Juda, a child and youth who lived directly across the street from me in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, and a dear friend called me, after 46 years to strike up a conversation again, and share the internet "info" that we both have a girl and two boys of similar ages. I brought out my '63 year book and we talked for an hour.

One episode after another in these short seven days. The bottom line, relationships. All these happenings and their greater stories seem to prepare me for this moment of talking about the center of the lectionary lessons and their commonality-

righteousness, defined here, as the right relationship between God and one's neighbor and fellow human being.

In the Old Testament lesson from I Kings, David is remembered as the most noble leader of Israel for some forty years. It was he who laid the foundation for the throne that Solomon, second son of Bathsheba, was inheriting. The scripture says clearly that Solomon loved the Lord, in the same fashion that David loved the Lord. That is to say, David had a deep mutual relationship with God reflected in the words, "walking in the statutes of Yahweh." What that means is David knew the ways: the laws, the methods of conducting life, the need for confession and forgiveness, the rudimentary redemptive Spirit of the Lord. For, as we all remember, David had made great gains and wonderful victories, but as well had suffered and owned up to tragic loss and sinful behavior, not the least of which was with Bathsheba, Uriah, Nathan and Absalom. You remember the lesson from last Sunday when Rabbi Siegel reiterated David's love for Absalom even though Absalom had turned against his father and sought to take over David's kingdom.

What I Kings makes clear, is that Solomon began his monarchy with the same appreciation, devotion, and at-oneness with the true Ruler of Israel, Yahweh. We all know as well that Solomon would be tempted and eventually depart from the solidarity, the righteousness, the right relationship, that he was grounded in by his father. But at the beginning of his reign, Solomon in his repeated devotion to Yahweh in the sacrifices he made at Gibeon, a holy shrine some seven miles north of Jerusalem, is given a godly visit. Yahweh says to Solomon in a dream, "You are right with me, as was your father, and I will give you what you ask." In the same right spirit, right relationship, Solomon speaks to Yahweh in what must be called a blessed unity and perfect response of oneness with God.

"You were extravagantly generous in love with David my father, and he lived faithfully in your presence, his relationships were just and his heart right. And you have persisted in this great and generous love by giving him- and this very day!- a son to sit on his throne. And now here I am God, my God, you have made me, your servant, ruler of the kingdom in place of David my father. I'm too young for this, a mere child! I don't know the ropes, hardly know the 'in's' and 'outs' of this job. And here I am, set down in the middle of the people you've chosen, a great people- far too many to ever count. Here's what I want: Give me a God-listening heart so I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil. For who on their own is capable of leading your glorious people?" (*The Message, Eugene Peterson, p. 368*)

God's response to this most right-relationship request indicates God's pleasure in this beautiful response. "Because you have asked for this and haven't grasped after a long-life, or riches, or the doom of your enemies, but you have asked for the ability to lead and govern well, I'll give you what you've asked for- I'm giving you a wise and mature heart. There's never been one like you before, and there'll be no one after." (*The*

Message; Eugene Peterson, pp.568-569.) These verses give a most adequate and revealing message for a right relationship with God. God is most interested to see if we can move beyond our self wants, our self needs, our self preoccupation. Did you expect anything else? For this moment in time, Solomon is able to dismiss his self interest and desires, and offer one of the purest God-responses in the Good Book. We can identify the truth for the moment, Solomon is on the very same wave-length as his Creator, and the Creator is joyously satisfied, and goes on to promise what Solomon did not ask for riches and honor, and if Solomon is faithful to God's way all his days, long life.

Most of us should be thrilled to hear and see such a simple defining moment for righteousness, right relationship. If we turn ourselves completely over to the agenda of the Lord which is loving God and God's people, being completely satisfied with the call to let the Lord rule our lives, we will be given grace upon grace. The problem is we, like Solomon, and for that matter David, still want to shape for ourselves the interpretation of what this all means. We, therefore, like Solomon begin to institutionalize what loving God means. Instead of the rightness of the Spirit, we begin to judge the correctness of the behavior, our behavior and other's behavior. Like Solomon, if God is still on the computer screen, we can allow the preoccupation with our stuff to separate us from the One, who gave it to us all in the beginning. Yes, Solomon built a magnificent temple to the Lord, but as if that were a license to do more, Solomon built a palace for himself that was bigger than the temple, and put its expense on the back of God's people. Yes, Solomon was given the savvy and the international peace building skills, but he allowed these relationships to turn into a mockery of womanizing and putting other pagan altars into the most "holy of holies." In his eyes he probably was able to rationalize his actions as being correct, correct enough that he did not have to dismantle his personal trophies, or "alter his altars" for the sake of Jehovah.

We, too, must admit that we can do the same kind of rationalizing after we have said "yes" to the call of God upon our lives. Out of our initial, "Lord, I would do it all for you," we can easily move into a mode where everything is judged on our personal take on whether what we are doing, is correct enough or not. Particularly as we age, and have spent decades in the Church, we can move into the "correctness" mode, finding that each year we move a little further away from the zeal we once had in God's righteousness.

In truth, the "right relationship" has greatly diminished into the "correcting justification" we make for ourselves. St. Paul's addresses this issue in the Ephesians 5 reading today when he says, "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise, making the most of the time because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." (NRSV) Eugene Peterson's rendering of the passage is most intense. "Don't waste your time on useless work, mere busywork, the barren pursuit of darkness. Expose these things for the sham they are. It's a scandal when people waste their lives on things they must do in the darkness where no one will see.

Rip the cover off those frauds and see how attractive they look in the light of Christ.”
(*The Message*, p. 2132)

We would return to the right relationship, the righteous Spirit that gripped us in the first place when we encountered the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel lesson in St. John 6 gives the instruction for returning to righteousness. It seems stark and a bit mysterious, and to those who have never been seized by God’s presence, weird. But hear these words afresh from the one who is our perfect righteousness, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” (NRSV) These words obviously are another sermon in themselves. But suffice to say, “If we want right relationships in our life, day after day, we must be at the table of Christ’s banquet continually eating his food, drinking his drink, and knowing him more fully day after day.” Relationships, particularly relationships in Christ, even after 46 years, are a gift from the One who seeks to make us right, day in and day out with Himself and with all those in the world.

Thanks be to God and thanks be to the Son who gives a place of righteousness in our every day through the Holy Spirit. Amen.