

“The Righteous for the Unrighteous”

Texts: Mark 1:9-15; Genesis 9:8-17

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February 26, 2012

I'm not much of a sailor myself, but my brother is. And so I have subsequently through the years been dragged on many sailing trips. A few years ago, I found myself on a rather long one. As I said, I had sailed many times before, but usually it was more of the sunfish variety. And this time it was a large catamaran on the open ocean. It was an illuminating experience to say the least, in addition to being a wonderful vacation. There is something about being twenty miles out to sea in a smallish boat that makes the old Mariners' Prayer make a great deal more sense. It's a whole other world, and one would expect that different laws might apply. It's wonderful; it's beautiful, but it's also extremely exposed. It's raw and immediate. There's a reason the old mariners pray, "Be good to me Lord, for your sea is so wide and my boat is so small." You could need others at any minute.

So you can imagine my surprise, when shortly after I returned, I was in a meeting, and our devotion consisted of a portion of a sermon speaking about maritime law. The woman who was offering the devotion quoted a minister named Eileen Lindner. Dr. Lindner was at the Jiffy Lube waiting for her car to be serviced. After a somewhat humorous pontification about the quality of literature available at the Jiffy Lube, she moved around to what she in fact to what she was actually reading. It was a chapter on maritime code. She read: "There are two kinds of craft. One of them has access to great power. It can accelerate and push its way through the strongest of waves. It can change direction on command. It can even stop on demand. It has great power of its own. The other class of craft is dependent on the forces of nature: wind, tide, and human effort in paddling, or rowing, or maintenance of the sails. And these two classes of craft are known as privileged and burdened."

But get this now -- the powerful boats, are they considered privileged or burdened? They, my friends, are the burdened vessels. The powerful boats that can make their way forward no matter what, under their own power, are the burdened vessels, burdened with responsibility to give way to the boats that are without power. And the powerless vessels, the ones dependent on tide and wind and weather, they are classified as privileged vessels. To them is accorded the right-of-way -- for if the powered vessels do not turn aside,

the un-powered vessels may not make safe harbor.” Dr. Lindner continues, “Imagine that: the powerful boats are burdened, and the powerless boats are privileged. And when these two kinds of craft meet each other on the open water, the powerful are burdened and must give way if the powerless are to make safe harbor. I thought to myself, who wrote this thing, Billy Graham? Mother Theresa?” She said, “I turned to the front and it said ‘New Jersey Department of Transportation.’” You know what a notable, theological institution the New Jersey Department of Transportation is!

Friends, what’s going on? What’s going on in our land when the Department of Transportation gets it that the powerful are considered burdened, and the powerless are considered privileged – yet the government of the United States and the Church of Jesus Christ are having trouble with this concept? ¹

Now, that’s her sermon; those are her politics, and I don’t try to bring my personal politics into the pulpit. And I don’t know whether the government of the United States knows this or not. But I do know that the church of Jesus Christ must absolutely understand this. We must understand that in the kingdom, *in the kingdom*, the rules are different. In the kingdom, we will live in God’s way. We will operate by Christ’s rules.

A number of years ago, I was in a discussion group with Doug Oldenburg, where we were talking about economic justice. There are few people who can talk about economic justice quite like Doug. During those discussions, he would generally manage to raise questions - pressing questions, needling questions - that would get at the people in the seminar. What I noticed, as we began to talk about economic justice, the stakes suddenly started rising. Emotions rose. I realized -- it’s tough, because when we think about the kingdom of God and justice and what it looks like, none of us want to think of ourselves as unjust. None of us wants to think of ourselves as outside the way of the kingdom of God.

So what does it mean to live in God’s way? It means to realize that the powerful are burdened, and the powerless are privileged, or at least they are in God’s order and the New Jersey Department of Transportation.

¹ Lindner, Elileen W. Thus Far on the Way: Towards a Theology of Child Advocacy. Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2006, p22-25

You see, the Bible offers us an ongoing view of what it means to live in God's way, and I will readily grant that it can be difficult at times to discern what that is. But if we diligently study the Bible, there are recurring themes all the way throughout that make God's wishes and will for us known. And they are very clear. But just because they are clear does not mean that they are without controversy.

One of the most controversial is the idea that God exercises a preferential option for the poor. Now this doesn't mean that God loves the poor more than the rich. God loves all of humanity. God made us, after all. Rich people can suffer and need every bit as much as poor people. I don't use people as sermon illustrations without their willingness, but I will tell you that I have known some very wealthy people, who have led very sad lives – and through no fault of their own. They were every bit as much in need of God's care, every bit as much in need of God's grace. God does not despise the rich to the benefit of the poor. But God does expect that we will be cognizant of the poor in our midst and their need. God knows who *needs* the most, and God cares who needs the most. That's what is meant by this.

God cares about us, whatever our life's circumstance. I do sometimes think that gets lost, that God cares. Not just about the corporate "us" -- of Morningside Church, or the Presbyterian Church, or even the church universal, but also the specific "us", the individual "you". God cares about you and you particularly. That is the Gospel, and it has always been the Gospel.

It's been the Gospel since God set that rainbow in the sky. I happen to think we treat the story of Noah and his ark very charitably. It's a terrifying story if we consider it with fresh eyes. God determines that creation is so flawed, so run amok that the only way to salvage it is to wipe the slate clean and start over again. Only the waters of the flood can restore righteousness. And so God acts.

God acts and we have the story of Noah's ark. Now, Noah's ark is portrayed on murals throughout the world in children's Sunday school wings, for their faith development, because the animals coming in two by two appears to be cute. And I will say it is cute! But I do have some questions about it. How did the termites survive the woodpeckers? Given the opportunity to eradicate the mosquito, why didn't God act in due course? But those questions gloss over the basic terror of the story. Despite the cuteness of the giraffes and

elephants and koala bears of our murals, it is a terrifying story. God had to establish holiness. God had to cleanse. It is terrifying...if you are a sinner.

But then God makes a decision. God decides to be for humanity. And in that decision, the powerful became burdened.

When God makes a decision, it is not made lightly. God makes a covenant with Noah. And it's not just a covenant with Noah; it's a covenant with us, with all of us. God promises that God is going to be for humanity. The Noahic covenant never gets mentioned again in all of the Bible, but it is foundational for everything that follows it because it tells us something of who God is. It tells us that the God we worship is the God who bears the burdens.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann spanned centuries of theology this way: "In this post-flood decree of creation, the sanctity of human life is established against every ideology and every force which would cheapen or diminish life. 'God deems himself violated in the violation of these persons.' (Calvin) In this decree is ground for Karl Barth's thesis of the *Humanity of God*. God unqualifiedly aligns himself with every human person as of ultimate value to him." The ultimate value of every person is echoed in the statement of Jesus, 'Even the hairs of your head are numbered. Fear not; are you of more value than many sparrows?'"²

God chooses to be for us and promises that it will always be so. That's a powerful decision. God didn't have to make it; God chose to.

And that is the Gospel - that God chooses to be for us. And because of this, Jesus doesn't act like a king or a politician. He doesn't stay in a royal palace; he doesn't wear soft robes. Jesus goes out into the wilderness for us. Jesus carries our burdens.

Through the years, I have realized that any preacher worth his or her salt should be mightily aware of the capacity for preaching to sound like a series of platitudes - I get this! We could make it sound platitudinous to say God carries our burdens. Jesus loves me; this I know for the Bible tells me so. God counts the hairs of my head. We could take these amazing promises and make them sound like platitudes. But they aren't. These aren't platitudes

² Brueggemann, Walter. Genesis in *Interpretation*. Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982. P82

unless treated cheaply and without care. Understood rightly, this is the heart of the Gospel - that God cares for each of us.

God chooses to be burdened for the powerless. This is the source of Isaiah's unbelievable assurance that 'when through the deep waters, I call thee to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow, for I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless, and to sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.' To redeem our distress - that's the only way I can make sense of Jesus going out into the wilderness. You go out into the wilderness because someone needs to be saved.

I understand that some people go out into the wilderness for fun. And when I say that, I get it -- the word wilderness should have air quotes around it, and by wilderness we mean as long as we have our North Face coats and sub-zero Marmot sleeping bags and bear repellent. We turn it into our living rooms writ large without TVs. That is not what the Bible means by "the wilderness."

When Jesus went out into the wilderness it was not a camping trip. It was the unknown, the unclean, the terrifying. When Jesus goes out into the wilderness, it is the righteous venturing out on behalf of the unrighteous to face temptation, and to return our troubles to bless.

That is the powerful being burdened, so that the powerless may be privileged.

We encounter two caricatures of Jesus in modern culture, to my mind: gentle Jesus, meek and mild, and Rambo Jesus, psychotic temple cleanser. I'm speaking tongue in cheek of course, but I suspect there's some truth to that. I suspect we are domesticating the grace of God by tying Jesus up in verbiage, so that he looks just like our prevailing ideology and the Gospel gets lost in the process.

The truth is that Jesus went out into the wilderness for us. He didn't have to. He chose to. Jesus went into the wilderness for us and it is the living out of the Noahic covenant: God is for us. God has declared himself to be burdened, in order that we may be privileged. And we can dance around the reality of this all day if we want to, but what it means is that God loves us, and we're stuck with that. And it means there's something we ought to do about it.

There's something so wonderful about that Noahic covenant, and the wonder is that is so closely tied to the creation narratives. Even before we get to Father Abraham and all the wonderful stories of the Old Testament, we know something about who God is. We know that God's righteousness is torn on the one hand between his love affair with the creation he made and loved so deeply, and his holiness, his righteousness. And yet, right there in the mess of creation, as it got worse, and worse and worse, and each did what they thought was right in their own mind – that's what leads up to Noah. God declares there isn't going to be any casuistry of theology that saves us from this awful conundrum: God made it to be good, and it's gone terribly off the rails. It's become flawed; it's become tragically flawed, and it must be fixed. And in a moment of terrible righteousness God fixes it, and declares instantly that it can never be thus again. The righteous takes on the burden of unrighteousness - of sin - so that the unrighteous may be privileged to be in communion. God decides it has to be different.

When Jesus goes out into the wilderness to be tempted, that is God choosing to be for us. The powerful are burdened, and the powerless are privileged. There's something off kilter about that! When you think about the way the world works, there's something off kilter about the powerful being burdened.

And yet, the truth is there has been something off kilter about it from the start. God's way is different. God's way is holy. And yet, God's holiness, God's declaration that God's way is different - God won't leave the unrighteous behind. God's concern for the unrighteous is positively scandalous!

But the danger we run when we declare that the Gospel is scandalous is that we'll declare it's scandalous so often, that it won't really be scandalous anymore. "The Gospel's scandalous. The Gospel's scandalous." We sound like Chicken Little when we say it. We sound like Chicken Little if we say it so often that it's meaningless because we haven't done anything about it. Then it becomes meaningless.

But if Jesus will go out into the wilderness for us, if Jesus will walk the lonesome valley to Jerusalem for us through this season of Lent, then it is not meaningless. It is decidedly different. It is the living out of God's declaration to Noah, to always be for us, despite the fact that we're unrighteous. That is different!

And thank God that is different; otherwise, we couldn't come here. It would be too terrifying.

But we can come. We can come because we are guests invited. God has called us to this place.

When we come together in this sanctuary, we're declaring that we're part of something different. Jesus calls all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens to come and have rest. That's right; the burdened can lay down their burdens. In the church, it's not so much that the burdened and the privileged have the reversal of roles; we do come, after all, as ourselves. It's that when we come to the church, the declaration that we are making is that we are all burdened, and we are all privileged.

We're all burdened. We're carrying a load of grace that must be given away. And we're all privileged, because God decided to make it that way.

Jesus didn't just go out into the wilderness for a good time. He went because the rainbow still means something: that God is still for us – for absolutely all of us. God set the bow in the sky to remind us of the covenant that the righteous will always stand for the unrighteous. God set the table to remind us that the powerful took on the burdens so that the powerless can be privileged.

That's kind of tough to acknowledge -- it is for me at least -- because it won't let us rest lightly in our own goodness. Let me ask you, do you really want to rely on your own goodness to save you? I'm more comforted by the idea that the powerful took on the burden of my sin. I don't know about you.

The whole thing's off kilter because it's God's way and God's world and God's church. So to all of you who are carrying heavy burdens, remember, the righteous one is waiting to welcome us all and give us rest. The powerful became burdened so that the powerless could make safe harbor.

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