

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Vocabulary of Faith: Righteousness
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Genesis 15:1-6; Romans 4:1-8

I want to begin this morning with a math problem. For some of you this will be easy and for others, perhaps, it will cause you to dig deep into your past. And when you have the answer just say it out loud. No need to raise your hand. Here it is. What do you get when you multiply negative one times negative one? That is correct, you get positive one, because a negative-number times another negative-number yields a positive number. We all know that this is the way negative numbers work...but I have to say, that for me, it makes no sense at all. After all, how can you take less than nothing, multiply it by less than nothing and get something? Would that work with bank accounts? If two people were both overdrawn and they multiplied their accounts together would they then have money? I ask this because this is the way I feel about the way that the church has used the word "Righteousness." They use it in a formula that seems to work, but which again, never made any sense to me. Let me explain.

The way righteousness has been used by the church goes something like this. The first part of the righteousness formula is that, God is, by definition, righteous, which means God is perfect; perfectly holy, perfectly loving and perfectly just. And because God is perfect, God cannot be in relationship with that which is imperfect. Instead God must condemn that which is not perfect, which leads us to the second part of the righteousness formula, us. This part makes clear that we human beings are not righteous, because we are not perfect. And regardless of how hard we try to be righteous, we cannot be. Thus, we cannot be in relationship with God, and so deserve God's judgment. The third part of this formula is that, God, because of God's love, wants to do something about this broken relationship. God does so by sending Jesus, who as the only fully righteous human being, can, by sacrificing himself on the cross, balance the formula. And this is how he does so. First, he "covers our sins", meaning he hides them from God's view. Second, he shares his righteousness with us. Thus, when God looks at us, God no longer sees our sins, but only Christ's righteousness. As a reconciliation formula it works, but for me, it never made sense. It never made sense for several reasons. First, in Genesis, Abram is declared to be righteous without Jesus or the cross. Second, I think that God is smart enough to still see our sins for what they are. Third, I don't think righteousness is a commodity that can be shared. Even so I had no better way to understand righteousness until two scholars led me back to the original Biblical meaning of righteousness...which is to be in right, or appropriate relationships.

It was in the writings of N.T. Wright and Paul Achtemeier (one of my professors) that I "discovered" that righteousness was not an inherent condition, perfection, but was instead a description of appropriately ordered relationships. One way, I hope, to make this clear is to look at my relationship with my mother. My mother was righteous. She was righteous not because she was perfect, but because she lived out her appropriate role as mother in relationship with me and my brothers. She loved us. She prayed with us. She disciplined us. She encouraged us. She kept her promises to us. She did what mother ought to do. At the same time my brothers and I were righteous...certainly not because we were perfect, but because we were appropriately related to our mother. We loved her. We listened to her (most of the time). We

obeyed her (most of the time). We learned from her. We prayed with her. We were all righteous because we lived out our relationships in appropriate ways and so, most importantly, this righteousness allowed us to live in loving, growing relationships.

Now back to the scriptures. We begin with God's righteousness, which is the foundation for our righteousness. God is righteous, not because God is someone who is this distant, perfect unapproachable being, but because God lives in right relationship with humanity. This right relationship is based on the reality that God is God and we are not. God is the creator. God is the redeemer. God is the promise maker and the promise keeper. God's righteousness is based on what Hebrew calls, *hesed*. *Hesed* is covenant faithfulness, meaning that God makes promises and keeps promises. We see this the story of Abram and Sarai, when God promises them if they leave their home and travel with God, they will receive land, offspring and blessing, and through them all the nations of the earth will be blessed. This is the promise that God will keep not simply in the birth of Isaac, but in the entire Biblical story, culminating in the birth of Jesus. This promise keeping is the Biblical basis for God being referred to as righteous.

God's righteousness then leads us to our righteousness. If God is righteous because God rightly relates to us as creator, redeemer and promise keeper, then we relate rightly to God when we follow Abram's example of trusting and obeying. This is the point that Paul is making in Romans, that we become righteous not by some mystical formula, or by perfect obedience to some religious laws, but we become righteous by trusting that God, in and through Jesus the Christ, has begun the recreation of the world and then living as if that new creation has begun. This is where righteousness and faith meet. If you remember from last week, Joanne spoke about faith as trust and faithfulness. The result of that trust and faithfulness is that our lives are lived in appropriate relationship with God. We can see this in the use of a word which has caused more theological debates than Amazon has products, and that word is "reckoned", as in God reckons righteousness. In the Greek and Hebrew it is a legal term that means to be declared innocent, or if you will, to be forgiven. But I would like to offer a slightly different take, and that comes from my Texas roots. That when God reckons someone righteous, it is God saying, "I reckon we understand each other now and so we're good," meaning both sides in a relationship have worked out the problems of the past and through God's faithfulness and our trust and obedience, we are living in a loving and growing relationship; that our lives are set on the right trajectory.

God desires that all humanity be in appropriate loving and growing relationships with God's self and with one another. God desires to say to us, I reckon we're good. In other words, we are invited to be righteous. And we can be when through faith, we trust in God's recreating work in Jesus Christ and we live as if that new reality is coming into existence, even when a world event seems to say otherwise. Which leads me to my challenge. The challenge for this week is to ask ourselves, How is my righteousness reflected in my trust in and obedience to, the world-renewing work of Christ in the world in what I say, do and believe