

The Calling to Righteousness

Isaiah 6:1-9

I John 3:1-7

Last week Ross Douthat, an opinion columnist with the New York Times, wrote a fascinating piece imagining what American Christianity might look like at Easter, 2050. I thank Connie McLaren for sharing it with me. Douthat took his inspiration from yet another survey---this one by the Gallup organization---showing the decline in church participation across our nation. Yet instead of settling for writing just another doom and gloom prediction of the demise of the church, he envisioned a kind of realignment of the Christian church into several larger groups already present today, if in less developed or identifiable forms.

Central Presbyterian Church has people from at least three, possibly four, of these groups. But we have a plurality who belong to one group, whom Douthat calls the Liberal Christians. He imagines that by 2050 Liberal Christians among the Roman Catholics and the old mainline denominations (Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians and Presbyterians) will have more in common with each other than we will with many others who come from our own denominations. I can say that I feel an affinity with the Sisters at St. Mary of the Woods. Though we belong to different churches we have much in common. As a group, Liberal Christians tend to be better educated and to earn more money than the national averages. We tend to vote Democratic---though

not all of us do—and to pay attention to the issues of abortion rights, racism, and LGBTQ concerns. You will not hear about any of those things on conservative talk radio, where they concern themselves with border security and the national debt. Such are the bubbles in which we now live on all sides.

Ross Douthat writes, “The question is what liberal faith’s institutional form looks like in 2050.” He describes the Roman Catholic and non-denominational versions, then adds, “Maybe a Mainline Protestantism that’s survived through consolidation, for example, former Episcopalians and Methodists and Congregationalists clustered together in a United Progressive Church.” Our Presbytery, which covers the southwestern third of Indiana, has long been closing congregations at the rate of one every two years. “Consolidation” may be taken as a euphemism for “implosion”. So the first five minutes of this sermon *have* preached doom and gloom. But we now turn to what we might see as our own path forward through these challenging times. We will take our guidance from the place we must never stop finding it: scripture.

Isaiah chapter 6 contains the vision the prophet took for his calling. It came to him “In the year King Uzziah died,” a specific time stamp. The vision happened around 720 years before Jesus walked this earth. This means Isaiah made all his prophecies—including the Messianic ones we associate with Jesus—a very long time in advance. 720 years ago today would put us in 1304 A.D. The English and Scottish negotiate a peace treaty, but William Wallace stays on the run. (And Mel Gibson makes a cool movie about it.) The cities of Venice and Padua fight the Salt War, over

control of that vital commodity. And yet another wave of the Plague ravages southern Europe. Yes, 720 years are a very long time.

Centuries before Christ, Isaiah has a vision that calls him to become a prophet. He sees the Lord enthroned in the Temple. The Lord's "train" fills the space. A better translation would be "skirts", to conform to the male wardrobe of the time and place, which consisted of a tunic and what we would consider a skirt. Perhaps more impressively, Isaiah sees seraphim with six wings. These beings appear throughout the Old Testament. We might think of them as a species of angel, as attendants upon the Lord, as messengers for the Lord. One of them sings praises to God. The temple's foundations shake at the power of that voice; smoke fills it. This yields a picture that rivals the opening of the ark of the covenant in Raiders of the Lost Ark.

Suddenly Isaiah feels he does not belong in the scene. He calls woe upon himself. He describes himself as "unclean". The great Old Testament scholar Bernhard Anderson writes that though the word does not appear in the Hebrew text, the best summary of how Isaiah feels in this moment is one word: shame. But the seraphim know better. One of them uses a pair of tongs to pick up a "coal", perhaps a super-heated rock from the altar. This would be part of the fuel that "cooks" the meat of the sacrificial animals on that altar. Just as those offerings purify those who make them in the eyes of the Lord, so this coal purifies Isaiah's lips. Now he can proclaim the word of the Lord. Now he can prophesy. Now he understands that no matter how often he may break the Law in its many details, God has chosen him for the specific

purpose of telling the people what God wants them to hear. He has been made to *appear* righteous whether he is or not.

I have the person concerned's permission to tell this story. A year ago, after we ordained and installed our newest crop of elders and deacons, one of them took me out to lunch. After we chit-chatted about our families and the casino and whatnot, the new elder said something along the lines of, "You know, when all the people laid their hands on me I suddenly felt totally unworthy to serve. Who do I think I am to fill such a big role?" I listened, trying to think of what to say. Finally, I remembered something John Calvin wrote. I paraphrased it on the spot, then looked it up when I got back to my office to make sure I had not misled our new elder. Here it is: "Our merit to perform the offices of the church lies solely in that Spirit of God which calls us to the work." Or as the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians, "not by *my* righteousness, but by Christ's, do I dare to do this work which he has assigned me as his servant."

Which takes us to the work of Christ as described in I John. The man who wrote the Gospel of John also wrote this letter to the early Christian church. It uses the same vocabulary and writing style. It also covers many of the main themes of the Gospel. Among those themes is the idea of light and seeing we find in our verses. We do not yet see perfectly who God is, nor who we will be once we unite with him in the life that is to come. But we will see. We will understand. We will live in the light and perform acts of righteousness.

In the mean time, what does God require of us? I John reads, “And every one who thus hopes in him purifies (themselves) as he is pure.” As a literal statement this is false. A lie. Every one of us knows that she or he sins. I certainly do. I will spare you a self-indulgent, theoretically therapeutic confession of my sins. Suffice it to say that I absolutely admit that I sin. I sin in ways that make me supremely grateful for the grace of God. So do we all. What, then, should we make of John's assertion that we can become pure *in this life*? We should make his statement *aspirational*. A person sitting here this morning, listening to this, will remember when he or she—with sensitive forethought—called my “leadership” of a particular effort “aspirational”. It was completely true. I believed in that work. I wanted to lead that work. But in truth I was not providing the leadership the work required. Hearing that others wanted to step in and provide better leadership actually gave me relief. In exactly the same way, hearing that Christ has already covered our impurity must give us ultimate relief.

Which takes us to how we can use these scripture passages to deal with the decline of the church in America. A person married to the person who called my leadership “aspirational” has questioned my recent focus on the health of the church. Why should we focus on the church, when Jesus focused on people? I believe I understand this person's thinking. If I understand correctly, then I must admit I completely agree. No church existed during Jesus' earthly life. We have no written record of him speaking about a church. He spoke, instead, about the spiritual and earthly health of people. But when we operate the church properly we focus on people, as well. We impure, aspirational followers of Jesus must use the church—and

every other tool at our disposal—to meet the spiritual and earthly needs of people.

Again and again, across the forty-plus years of my career, I have witnessed the impact of ministries that keep their focus on the spiritual and earthly needs of people. A tiny rural congregation that no longer exists, halfway between here and Bloomington. A mega-church in the suburbs. A congregation in an overgrown small town we last lived in thirty-four years ago but where, if we walked in the door tomorrow, we would be welcomed as though we were their long-lost best friends. A church we helped start that now must deal with the loss of one of its most beloved members. Here. Again and again I have witnessed the impact of ministries that keep their focus on the spiritual and earthly needs of people. And whatever may become of the institutional church, of bricks and mortar and endowment funds, people must remain our focus. And when we focus there, we meet God's aspirations for us.

We cannot be righteous, not completely. But God has called us to try. And loving one another is probably the most powerful way we can succeed. Listen. Forebear. Take action. Honestly, one tremendous example of this comes from another person sitting and listening to this. They probably do not see themselves in this light, but others have noticed. This person persistently visits others. It means the world to those they visit. *That* is how we show the power of God's spirit working through the church. Whatever happens to the church is in God's hands. What we do through the church is in ours. It is God's righteousness working through us. Do that, and let the chips fall where they may as a congregation.