Righteousness & Self-Righteousness

Mary Garman

Introduction

"Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). These acts describe a way of being in the world that is compelling and enlivening. Living that way opens up a whole range of possibilities.

We notice that the three types of action in Micah 6:8 are linked. We begin to sense that one way to do justice is to love mercy, and that loving mercy fully requires a humble walk across the earth, and that true humility results in living a just life, which means a life of love. And around and around it goes.

The question emerges as we see the spiral develop. How, in our daily living, can we learn to become participants in such a way of life? How can we join with others in the constellation of acts that correspond to these requirements? Who can help us to say yes to this pattern for living with our lives?

To address these questions I want to look at another crucial biblical term and to suggest ways for it to guide us, as Friends, into a deeper commitment to activism, based on the vision expressed in Micah 6:8. The term I will focus on is *righteousness*. I will indicate how the message of Quakerism can lead us into the paths of righteousness, as the psalmist says, for the sake of the name of God.

The concept of righteousness

I am convinced of several things:

1. Most of "us" (contemporary people, including Quakers, in the late twentieth century) don't understand the concept of righteousness. Many of us, I suspect, would never use the word "righteousness" because it carries connotations of rigidity, judgment, blaming, and maybe even dangerous zeal that we would associate with extremist groups. Other people in this world have coopted this word, and are abusing it.

2. Without denying that the word "righteousness" is problematic for us, I would also argue that much of the pain and misery and grief of the world is caused by people committing acts that are not righteous. In other words, the world lacks righteousness, and people suffer for it.

3. As Friends, we have some crucial contributions to make to this conversation about righteousness. Opening up these questions can help us bring about righteousness in a broken and uneasy world.

What resources do we have to help us?

We have our history—the story of the Friends who have gone before us—to teach us how to be righteous. I want to begin my exploration of Friends' history not with heroic deeds but with Quaker language. The central Quaker experience is to encounter the powerful presence of the living God and then to seek to express to one another—in worship and in daily living—what that means. We are essentially poetic people in the ways we seek to describe the joy of being in the presence of the Divine. We need to prize that poetic Quaker language.

Dorothy White, in *A Salutation of Love to all the Tender Hearted, who Follow the Lamb, wherefore he Leadeth them* (1684), writes about the experience of coming into relationship with Christ and feeling the power of God purifying and sustaining and making her whole:

> So all that are Living Members of Christ's Body have a Living Faith in them, which purifieth them, and maketh them like his Glorious Body; these know an Inward Work day by day wrought in them; not what they see another do, so to practice or follow, but as they feel sensibly in In-speakings and Inward Motions and Workings of Faith work in them, to will and to do of his own good pleasure; for by his Word begat he us into this Living Hope and Lively Faith, which hath already removed Mountains out of the way in them that believe.

I'd like to give you a second example from a more contemporary Quaker source—the Earlham College community code in the section on Respect for Persons:

> The Quaker approach to life has as its foundation the belief that every person has available to her or him access to an inner spirit of truth (also termed the Inner Light, the Christ within, the Inward Teacher or God's voice within). This belief in the inner spirit guides Quakers in their association with others. It implies that personal relationships be approached in openness, mutual respect, honesty and trust.

We hear in Dorothy White and in other early Friends the desire to speak about God's presence by piling up and balancing images and symbols. Both of these documents speak about doing right and about how God is a part of making choices to do right. They also reflect the Quaker practice of accumulating definitions rather than seeking to speak precisely. In the language we use to speak about the world as Friends, we imply that righteousness is neither an arbitrary nor a relative way of being. Righteousness can be chosen; not all things *are* righteous, and one way to explain that is through poetry.

Ancient Hebrew poetry shows us how righteousness feels. Hebrew poetry teaches about the meaning of righteousness in powerful and beautiful ways. One central feature of Hebrew poetry is the use of parallelism. Ideas, concepts, images are balanced against each other. The result is explanation by contrast, by expansion, by repetition, and by explication. In our quest to understand the meaning of righteousness, what can we learn from Hebrew poetry? (See Psalms 33:1-5 and Psalms 85:10-13.)

By poetic means, we learn that righteousness is not rigid following of laws at all and is not one single and fixed "thing-to-do" that is commanded by the law. The poets show us rather than telling us. Righteousness exists where we find justice, faithfulness, peace, and love. To do and be righteous is to be loving, just, peaceful and faithful.

Using the same parallelism that we find in Hebrew poetry, the speeches of the Biblical prophets are also sources for us in our search for the true meaning of righteousness. The prophet Isaiah, speaking for God, calls the people back to righteousness, which he describes thus: "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness. Let the earth open, that salvation may spring up, and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also. I the Lord have created it" (Isaiah 45:8).

Not only does righteousness emerge in the midst of other qualities, like faithfulness and peace and justice, but righteousness is built into creation itself, and so is part of the creator's plan. In other words, righteousness comes ultimately from God.

Quakers have a long history of calling the world and themselves to do right, to be righteous. In 1659, very early in the Quaker movement, a group of Quaker women sent petitions to Parliament demanding an end to the practice of collecting tithes. The introduction to the petitions drew on a series of Biblical images; the focus in the introduction was on God's power to "bring down every high thing within us and without" so that God's will might be accomplished. These petitions, which came from counties all over England, included pleas on behalf of those Friends who were in prison, descriptions of their faithfulness and their suffering, and invitations to Parliament to repent and "live in the power of God." For the 3,000 Quaker women who circulated and signed these petitions, paying tithes represented a betrayal of their newly discovered life in the power of Christ. In vivid terms they argued that Christ's coming had "overturned" all the old orders and presented all people with the choice of a new life. All vestiges of the old order, including priests, hireling ministers, parish support, and all mandated funds for waging war, they considered "disanulled" by the coming of Christ.

Their refusal to pay tithes meant that these Quaker women condemned the social and political system in which they lived. They considered the existing system to be wicked and faithless. Drawing on the Biblical images of a just society, which would care for the most vulnerable members, they charged that their persecutors provided "no Store-house for Widows, for Stranger, for Fatherless" and instead were apostate and not true Christians. Refusal to pay tithes meant prison and confiscation of land and property.

To be a Quaker, in many senses, is to join in the long tradition of naming and then standing up for righteousness. This is what we have inherited from the past—those of us born into it and those of us who grafted ourselves into it.

The Bible as resource

We can't always do exactly what early Friends did, but we can look to see how they did it. Early Friends relied on the Bible, and

so can we as we develop a definition of righteousness that works in our world. For me the Bible is a sacred text, full of power and beauty and wisdom. There are also other texts—but not many—some ancient, some contemporary, that are sacred for me. The Bible has authority for me, but not authoritarian power.

There are many examples of righteousness to be found in Biblical stories. In the 38th chapter of Genesis, Tamar married one of Judah's sons, and the son died. According to the tradition, Judah's next son had a social and religious obligation to make sure that Tamar had a child, so that the dead brother would be remembered. This second son refused to fulfil this obligation, and he also died. Now Judah had a third son, but he was still a little boy, so Judah promised Tamar that if she would wait, he would see that the family obligation would be fulfilled—that *right* would be done. But Judah became afraid for his son and did not send him to Tamar when he grew up. Tamar learned of this and tricked Judah (who by this time was a widower) by disguising herself as a prostitute and inviting him into a sexual relationship with her. Tamar-as-prostitute asked for and received a pledge from Judah (a sign of who he was) and returned to her life as a widow.

When the news got out that she was pregnant, Judah confronted Tamar. (She had broken the law, and deserved to be burned.) She, in return, produced proof that he was the one who was the father of her child. Judah was stunned by this and responded with the words: "She is more righteous than I." Judah recognized that he, out of fear and lack of faith, had failed to do what the relationship demanded.

Whatever you may think about Tamar's desire to become pregnant and bear a child, it is important to reflect on this story to see what it has to teach us about righteousness.

Tamar was called "righteous" because she made sure that her relationships were fully honored. As a widow in Israel she could make certain claims on the family of her dead husband. Righteousness means faithfully living out the responsibilities implied in our relationships.

She was the victim of injustice. Judah, by refusing to see to it that she bore a child into the religious community, had condemned her to a permanently vulnerable position. Despite her lowly status as woman and as childless widow, she was called righteous.

Tamar was an angry, impatient, crafty woman. She refused to continue waiting for Judah to do right, she tricked him into a sexual contact by which he did right (although he didn't know that was what he was doing), and then she used extortion to make sure that she survived. Righteousness is not the same as "niceness" or "good manners" and requires courage, creativity, and sometimes even rebellion.

What do we know about righteousness from this story? Righteousness looks like peace, justice, love, faithfulness as they are experienced within our relationships. To discover righteousness we often look to people who are afflicted or victimized or marginalized within society. Righteous acts are often characterized by a certain outrageousness, risk-taking, and sometimes challenges of the status quo, the established order, the "way things are."

The story of Tamar illustrates the meaning of righteousness because it frees us from some of the connotations attached to the term. Quite often the term "righteousness" conjures up implications of rigidity, legalism, and excessive piety, and we are left with a sense that the righteous person is one who knows and follows a set of narrow and vindictive rules with terrible zeal and considerable smugness.

Instead, we learn from Quaker language and Hebrew poetry and prophetic literature that righteousness is associated with joy and with the infra-structure of the creation. From the story of Tamar and Judah and the heroic stories from our Quaker past, we learn that righteousness is visible when those in power are required to live up to their responsibilities, when those who are victims act to save their own lives and to fulfil the claims of relationships.

Seeking a balance

For us as Friends, one of the best examples we can follow to discover how to be righteous is John Woolman, the eighteenth-

century Quaker who worked on behalf of freedom for African slaves.[1]

What John Woolman came to know was that righteousness finally comes about within community as we learn to go forward together—not seeking to be "right," but seeking to be faithful; not seeking to be "holy," but seeking to be humble; not seeking to be "good," but seeking to be just.

As we try to find a balance point in our search for righteous living, I want to return to the points I made earlier about the lack of righteousness in the world and the level of suffering that results from that lack. Often this misery is compounded by a kind of paralysis that may be familiar. It comes about when we feel horror at an act that we think is wrong and overwhelming fear and a sense of futility at the thought of doing anything about it. When I look at that fear in myself I think it often stems from my inability to stand up for righteousness, for fear of falling into self-righteousness. I am not alone in this. To move out of this paralysis, then, we must learn how to distinguish between righteousness and self-righteousness.

Jesus of Nazareth often spoke about righteousness, and he also told some wonderful stories that are helpful to us. In the eighteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, verses 9-14, Jesus tells a story about two men who go into the temple to pray. One is a leader in the religious community, an interpreter of the religious codes, who is expected to be a pious man and is respected by the community. The other is a tax collector, which means he collaborates with the occupying Romans by collecting the money they need to maintain their political oppression of the Jews. This man knows that he regularly breaks the religious laws and knows that he is hated by the people of his religious and social community.

Jesus tells us that the first man, the religious leader, prays aloud and says: "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." He lists

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[1] My colleague Michael Birkel is a Woolman scholar. He had planned to be at NPYM this summer, but he is home with his new baby. He has talked with me a lot about this topic and I want to acknowledge his help.

the ways he is faithful to God's commands by observing the rituals of giving money to the temple.

Jesus tells us that the second man, the tax collector, prays with his eyes down, beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus concludes his story with a one-sentence teaching: "I tell you, this man [meaning the tax collector] went down justified rather than the other [that is, the religious leader]; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This story confirms much of what we learned from the Tamar story. It cautions us against the belief that righteousness equals following a list of rules, since it is the tax collector, and not the observant religionist, whom Jesus calls "righteous." The difference between the two men is this: the religious leader, like Judah, has made himself the standard for righteousness, while the tax collector continues to look to God for that standard.

Much of the power in this story comes from its time-release quality. I like to imagine listening to Jesus telling this story. He describes the characters well, and I can almost see them. I imagine my reaction to the conclusion: surprise, perhaps even amazement at the reversal of what I expected. I also imagine what my next thought would be once I thought I understood Jesus' point: "Wow!" I would think, "Am I ever glad that I am not like that Pharisee!"

As Friends, we must listen for those times when we begin to say: "I thank thee, Lord, that I am not like other people who need sacraments or hate homosexuals or don't have a peace testimony." We must listen for those times that we list the good things that we or our ancestors have done, as if those deeds were proof of our righteousness. We must not make ourselves the standard for others' righteousness.

We must instead call ourselves and one another back to humility, to justice and to love, to faithfulness in relationships, to authentic listening to the marginalized and the forgotten, and to patient encouragement of all.

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