

Right Relationship

by Rev. Joseph Connolly

“When John came to you walking on the road of righteousness— a right relationship with God— and justice, you did not believe, but tax collectors and prostitutes did.” — Matthew 21:32a.

What I am about to say is not true for some of us. But it is true both world wide and for many Americans. Facebook has become ubiquitous, omnipresent.

It seems to be everywhere, on our computers, on our phones, in our lives. Even if you do not have a computer and you do not have a have a so called smart phone, if you read the newspaper, watch television or have conversation with others, at some point Facebook will be mentioned. So the odds are you have at least heard of Facebook.

Facebook’s whole concept is one becomes friends— Facebook friends, that is— with other people. This is, as they say, social networking. Indeed, I am a Facebook friend with people I have never met face to face but with whom I am now networked.

Some are professional contacts, such as John Dorhauer, President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ. Some are simply friends of friends. For instance, David Spiegel, pastor at the First Baptist Church, and I are Facebook friends. Of course, we are not just colleagues. We *are* friends.

But, because of my Facebook friendship with David, one of his friends, William Field, a professor at Rutgers University and a member of a United Church of Christ Church in New Jersey, sent me a friend request. Why? I don’t really know.

Since I am David’s friend he might have seen something I posted and liked it. In any case, he sent me a friend request and I accepted. Hence, I am now his Facebook friend. We have never met face to face. Do we really know each? Ehhh, not really.

Well, and to be clear, what many people post on Facebook is frivolous, not a bad idea bit frivolous— what they had for dinner, where they are going, that they put up shelving in the kitchen. Family pictures, pet pictures, pictures of them standing in front of landmarks get posted. Well, I recently saw this funny write up about what people post on Facebook. Let me share it. (Slight pause.)

I am trying to make friends outside of Facebook by applying the same principles I use in Facebook. Therefore, today I walked down the street and told the people I passed what I had for dinner, how I felt at that moment, what I did last night, where I will go later and with whom.

I gave these people pictures of my family, of my cats, of me standing in front of landmarks. I even followed people down the block for hundreds of yards, listening to their conversations. I gave them a thumbs up and told them I liked what they said.

It turns out this worked just like Facebook works. When you do this people actually do follow you. I’ve done this for just a day and I already have four people following me: two police officers, a private investigator and a psychiatrist! (Slight pause.)

These words are in the work we have come to know as Matthew: “When John came to you walking on the road of righteousness— a right relationship with God— and justice, you did not believe, but tax collectors and

prostitutes did.” (Slight pause.)

Question: which translation of the Bible did the Pilgrims bring with them to these shores? Hint: it was not the King James Bible.

The King James was the work of the English crown, the government and the Anglican Church. The other name by which the Pilgrims are known is, you see, Separatists. They did not agree with the actions of the crown or the church when it came to faith. Neither did the crown nor the church agree with their style of religious practice.

We Twenty-first Century Americans do not seem to get this. The religion an individual practiced in the 17th Century was determined by what the government said the religion of the individual needed to be. The individual had no say.

That, in part, explains why the Bible of the Pilgrims was the Geneva Bible. And, just FYI, the Geneva Bible was what Shakespeare would have used and quoted, since the King James was compiled after the death of the Bard.

This brings me to what I think of as the key word in this passage: righteousness. Today people most take righteousness to mean a person is morally right or justified.

In the translation I used today the word is elaborated on: righteousness— a right relationship with God. I think the one word translation in Geneva Bible, the one the Pilgrims used, is quite accurate. The Geneva Bible used the word right-wise— one is right-wise with God. (Slight pause.)

So, how does all this fit in with Facebook? Facebook may or may not be about real friendships, real relationships. As a *New York Times* columnist has said about this, our Facebook friends probably will not be able to water our flowers while we are away. But the actual human who lives next door, if we develop and have a real relationship with that person, might. (Slight pause.)

I think real relationships are about a binding trust, covenant. But I am not sure you can have or come to binding trust, covenant, just on a computer, just on Facebook.

Jesus, you see, had a right-wise relationship with God, a binding relationship with God. And Jesus says even some tax collectors and prostitutes have a right-wise relationship with God, a binding relationship with God.

And what is being in a right-wise relationship with God about? It is about trusting God totally, trusting that God walks with us no matter what happens in our lives. (Slight pause.)

And what trait did Jesus, the Messiah, have with God? As the reading from Philippians today reminded us, Jesus trusted God totally. (Pause.)

What I am about to say may sound like I am getting off my central idea here, that we need to emulate Jesus in our trust of God. But believe me, I am not.

Total trust, you see, by its nature involves our emotional life. And the language we call music unquestionably involves our emotional life. And so today we will dedicate a piano. As we do so we shall pray— this is in the liturgy— that “...we must, ourselves, be dedicated to seeking Your will and doing Your will.”

Unless we engage not just our intellect but our emotional lives in trusting God there is no way we can be dedicated to seeking and doing the will of God. And music helps us do that— engage emotionally.

Therefore, it is appropriate that today we dedicated this instrument. Also and indeed, as we encourage one another let us be in right-wise relationship with God *and* with one another, rather than being satisfied with the kinds of surface relationships we so often see all around us, that we so often see in society today. Amen.

10/01/2017 ~ Dedication of the Chaplin Family Piano
United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “You have probably heard me say this many times. The famous lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II said song happens in a musical when the emotions being conveyed are too great to be carried by mere dialogue. Our relationship with God is not and cannot be simply an intellectual relationship or even a distant relationship. Our relationship with God needs to be right-wise, fully engaged on all levels, including an emotional level. Therefore, make no mistake about this. Every time we sing a hymn certainly one purpose is to help us engage with God on an emotional level. And that has been true since some lyricist and some composer wrote the first Psalm.”

BENEDICTION: The grace of God is deeper than our imagination. The strength of Christ is stronger than our need. The communion of the Holy Spirit is richer than our togetherness. O Holy Triune God, guide and sustain us today and in all our tomorrows. Amen.