

## Message: How righteous are we?

Pastor Riva

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer, and my refuge. Amen.

Hopefully, we are familiar with the passage this morning. For most people who identify themselves/ourselves as progressive or progressive-leaning, this passage is our battlecry. If people ask us why we do what we do, this is our reply. We care and love our neighbors – the weak, the poor, the marginalized, the persecuted, the hungry, the homeless...and all of those who are considered the least of these. As people who believe that we are the hands and the feet of Jesus and God to the world, this is the reason why. This passage let us see Christ not as the blue-eyed, blonde-hair, fair skinned man, but the homeless person who holds out a sign as a cry for help, the single mother who cannot sleep because she is figuring out where to get the next meal for her children, the transgender teenager who is contemplating to end their life because they are not accepted as who they are. In verses 37-39, it was obvious that those who are considered the righteous ones, were confused because they were showing their love to others as how they would usually do and not realizing that it was Jesus who received their love. While the people who are considered the unrighteous people, they missed the opportunity to show their love to those that represented Christ, because they were busy looking for the blue-eyed, blonde-haired and fair-skinned Jesus.

We all know this already. Community UMC being a reconciling congregation voted that this passage is our mandate. This is nothing new to us, right? Anita Thompson preached about how our congregation shows love in action. There is really nothing new about this passage for us, we are already practicing it. The UMW supports different organizations that they support as acknowledgement of this passage. We are doing these because we as are acknowledging and recognizing that we see Jesus in the faces and beings of those who are the least of these. However, for today I would like to offer a few other perspectives that we can learn from our passage today. We can look at this passage as our checklist, and hopefully see ourselves as the righteous. But before that, I would like to invite you to rethink the 'least of these' especially in the pandemic era. One of the most challenging parts of the pandemic is being with other people who we are not staying home with. Health experts have been telling us, inundating us with advice that we have to practice social distancing, only go out of the house for important errands, no shaking of hands and hugging, and wear face coverings (masks and/or face shields). Because of this, face-to-face visiting has become almost a threat to a person's safety and well-being. Then, visiting the hospitals, shut ins, and nursing homes has become so regulated and restrictive that it has become hard to visit with others. Technology has become our ally, but unfortunately, it was not enough for folks because of various reasons. So how exactly do we become righteous in this regard? Another complexity of this passage is dealing with the hungry and the thirsty. There are instances that the people who are asking for food and water smells like they have been drinking alcoholic beverage. In the past, I would ask the question of is it worth doing it. Would it be helping or enabling? In the time of political divide, I heard many times that the reason why people are 'red-leaning' was because the blue party enable people's laziness and wanted to take advantage the assistance that the government provides for those who really needed it. How should we reconcile that then? I guess the main question is are we in the first place in the position to question this or to even think twice about helping those

who are in need? How can our righteousness be seen in these situations? Additionally, how can we help others if we ourselves are struggling, if our family members are suffering? How do we bring ourselves to going out of our way to helping if we ourselves need help? To spin this differently, November is our stewardship drive, and we reach out to the members of faith circle and ask for financial gifts to the church so that we can continue the ministries that we are maintaining. The question arises if this is needed in the pandemic, in the times where our church buildings are closed, and we do not know where the resources are channeled. How can we extend our generosity when we are also struggling financially? Or when we feel that church is not happening because the definition of a normal church routine has changed.

This week, we will be celebrating Thanksgiving differently. The Department of Health are advising us to refrain from having families over for now...until the pandemic is over. Instead of having a lavish Thanksgiving, how about we make it as a time of reflection of the things that we are thankful for, and also be in solidarity with those who have not had the lavish Thanksgiving dinner whether by choice or circumstance. Maybe this can be a year of sharing that lavish dinner with those who are hungry, those on the streets. But I would also like to push the envelope further and encourage you to think about the reason why Thanksgiving is celebrated. Think and reflect how the indigenous people suffered when the colonizers came to this country. Think about how the privileged race been employing its superiority and have disenfranchised those who have darker skin colors. See the face of Jesus in the people who are suffering because they/we have darker skin colors. To be honest, historically, Jesus is a dark-skinned person. Whether you agree with that or not, if you want to get into historically accurate facts, Jesus is a black person. But more than all of that, I think one way of putting this passage into practice is acknowledging the humanity of people with darker skin colors or even advocating for racial justice. While we are isolating in our homes because we are caring for each other, I would like to invite you to take this time of being 'alone' to reflect and even meditate on how we can realistically practice the mandates of this passage.

It is true that as a reconciling congregation, this passage does not need to be preached to us anymore because of what we are already doing, but I would like to invite you all to broaden our sight to not just the missions that we are already supporting but also try to see what the Columbia Heights neighborhood needs. What do we do with the homeless that we see on the streets, those who are on the roadside holding signs, those who are knocking on our church doors? For now, we have lasagnas in the freezer for them. Bill Burton has been giving them away to individuals and families who have knocked on our church doors. How about thinking about the coming weeks when it will be too cold to stay in a tent? What can we do? What are we ready to do? What sacrifices are we willing to take to be church that people will come to because they feel that they are safe and welcomed in our midst?

The pandemic changed our lives dramatically. Given the chance, I will not count 2020 as a year that happened because it robbed me of a lot of things. If only I can do that. I'm certain there are a lot of us who feel this way, too bad we can't just forget this year. In my opinion, I feel that this has been the longest year ever. If only we can pretend that all that have happened this year is part of a dream, and when we wake up, everything is back to how it used to be. But we can't and we just have to adapt to what we have in order to survive this whole pandemic – and survive it in all of the aspects, with our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. Pandemic or not, we are still God's children, created in God's image. God is with us in this pandemic, now it is our turn to let other people know and let them feel that. These are all of people who are also created in God's image that they are God's children, God loves them, and God is with them, in all the ways that we can.