

## “What’s Wrong With Being Right”

Text: Romans 3:9-26

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Sometimes I think we live in the age of the rant. Social media has given almost anyone who wants one a platform where they can go off in an angry tirade about any topic or issue. Rants have become so commonplace that political leaders and celebrities have become particularly famous for rants and the ability to inspire rants in others of the likes I have seldom seen.

A while ago, when doing some online reading, I came across a rant, not one by a politician or anything to do with politics for that matter, but written by an individual who felt as if his rights and personal dignity had been dealt an injustice for the ages. This fellow told the story about how he had been driving through his neighbourhood when he was pulled over by the police and issued a ticket for a traffic violation.<sup>1</sup> He was furious. Insisting he was in the right, this fellow went on about how he had done nothing wrong and decided to contest the ticket in court.

Apparently, this guy could not wait for his day in court. He had prepared diligently to stand before the judge and defend his reputation. He took the time to go to the intersection where he had been ticketed. He took photographs, got them enlarged and mounted on boards as exhibits for his defense. He got maps from the municipal office, even a copy of the weather conditions for that day. He was ready to prove that he was right and that police officer was wrong.

Finally, his day in court arrived. He showed up carrying his exhibits under his arm, his briefcase was filled with supporting documents, and he sat and waited for his case to be called. BUT, when his case was called, the officer who had issued the ticket was not present. Thus the judge decided to annul the ticket and the case was dismissed. You would think this would have made the guy’s day...but it didn’t. It made him even more upset. In his rant, he made these disparaging remarks about the police officer, the judge, people related to his whole experience.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://dabronxtrafficlawyer.com/a-day-fighting-for-clients-in-da-bronx-blog/>

He was upset because he was denied the opportunity to prove he was right. He wanted nothing more than to be right...it was more important to him than his innocence. And this rant of his, there for anyone to read, was a rant that really had nothing more to say than, "I need to be right!"

As I read the post I asked myself, what is it about this need to be right that causes people to behave in such fashion? I think of all of the energy, emotion and time that he spent to prove himself right, even after the fact, and I wonder if it was all worth it? I think of all the other things he could have put his energy into. He just couldn't let it go. Is being right always that important?

The topic of righteousness is one that runs deep in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Old Testament, righteousness is a key theme that covers a broad range of meanings that have to do with God's character and our human conduct. In the scriptures, "righteousness" is related to our "standing" or "status" in the eyes of God and in the eyes of those around us. In the history of God's people and the communities in which they existed, "righteousness" was attained by being faithful to the "law" or the "teachings" of the Torah. And by the time the early churches were being established in the first century, the issue of righteousness became problematic and was creating division within the communities. There were one's who felt as if they were right and others were not.

This is what Paul is addressing in his letter to the Romans out of which our text is taken this morning. The context of the early church was such that many of the first followers of Jesus were Jewish Christians. They were Jews who had come to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Many of the early churches gathered in the synagogues that had existed in the various Roman cities. There were also in these communities Christians who had come to the faith not as Jews, but as Gentiles -as non-Jews. This was the case in the city of Rome where a rift had developed between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. In the eyes of the Jewish Christians, the righteousness of these Gentile Christians was being called into question. They were not circumcised and thus outside of the law. They were not "right." This was causing all sorts of upset in the church, straining interpersonal relationships. Attend a gathering at a church in

Rome and you might hear somebody say, “Well, I’ve been a part of this a lot longer than you...I know what’s right...I’m right.”

And this, so often is what’s wrong with the need to be right. When we need to be right, our need to be right becomes more important than our personal relationships. Rather than working on building community with others and doing the “right thing” we let our egos get in the way. Our own personal sense of being right matters more than the health of the community in which we are called to live. We see this dynamic at work in our world and in our lives all the time. How many people out there think they are “right” because they believe they have some special status that makes them right. Think of issues around immigration and ones who think they are right because they are natural citizens and they believe this makes them more right than outsiders. Ones who say, “I’ve been here longer than you, so I’m right.” Or others who think their skin colour makes them right, or the amount of money in their bank account, or where they work, or who they associate with...or how they have been victimized and on and on it goes. Are these things that really make us right? Sometimes we choose to think so.

It’s embarrassing for me to admit how often I have wanted to be “right,” and how hard it can be for me to let go of the need to be right. But this need to be “right” (which, of course, means that someone must be “wrong”) is, honestly, sort of childish. It’s the need to get one’s own way. And yet, it persists far beyond actual childhood. When people feel they are “right” and their cause just, they will say and do the worst things to those who do not agree with them. If your cause is righteous, it is apparently okay to treat others very badly...say disparaging things like that fellow waiting for his day in court. I know I’ve gotten trapped in wanting and ranting to be right -- to prove, show, demonstrate that I am right – and far too often, sadly, in some of my closest relationships. And what I have learned that the need to be right can end up being wrong.

So what’s the alternative to being right?

I believe it is being well. Focus on being well instead of being right.

This is what Paul wanted for the Christians in Rome. He wanted them to be well, to be in community together. And thus he wants them to let go of this need to be right. For righteousness, our righteousness in God’s eyes does not originate in ourselves...in our ego. It

comes from God. And as Paul says, it comes from God to those who believe. It is a matter of faith. It is believing in an act of Divine forbearance that seeks to preserve the wellbeing of individuals and human community. It is where the righteousness of God seeks to take us. It's not a righteousness that leads to rants...it's a righteousness meant to give peace on all sides.

It's like the old story of these two friends name Max and Isaac who come to their Rabbi's study to settle a dispute. The Rabbi's spouse is also seated in the room. Gathered together Max explains his complaint to the Rabbi: the story is such and so, and he has to do this and he has to do that. He gives a fine account and argues his case clearly. The Rabbi looks as Max nods his head and says, "You're right." Next, Isaac presents his side. He speaks with such passion and persuasion that the Rabbi says to Isaac, "You're right." After they leave, the Rabbi's spouse is upset and says, "They have conflicting stories. How can you say that both of them are right? When one wins, the other must lose." The Rabbi thinks long and hard and finally says to his spouse, "You know, you're right."

Sometimes what we yearn more than anything is to have someone tell us we're right. Acknowledge the desires of our ego. However, beyond the needs of our ego to be right, beyond winning and losing, there is still this matter of how we play the game of life. There is no righteousness when communities and relationships are being ripped apart when people fight over what makes them right. In fact, in the Old Testament quite the opposite is true. Righteousness is what contributed to and was the essence of the well-being of community. For example in Psalm 112, the psalmist declares "They rise up in the darkness as a light; they are gracious, merciful and righteous...their hearts are steady...they have distributed freely, they have given to the poor...their righteousness endures forever." Time and again, righteousness is used to describe ones who give of themselves -put their egos aside- to engage in the activity that lends stability and peace. This is counter to what we so often see in politics on all sides when so many people are more interested in ranting their way, needing to be right in a fashion that threatens all stability and peace.

Now this doesn't this mean that forsake moral judgment, right and wrong, good and bad. This doesn't mean giving up moral meaning and the importance of right and wrong action. It does not mean we give up defending injustice when it happens, but *it does mean giving up*

*my ego.* The paradox is that when you get into right versus wrong bickering in personal relationships-- even if you believe you have won -- you have actually lost. You can lose the respect of others, lose opportunities for further dialogue and a deeper relationship. Surrendering your need to be right, can confer a very different kind of victory. A victory over your own ego and the survival, maybe even renewal, of a relationship. Strangely enough, in letting go of what we think we must have, sometimes we get what we most need. In letting go of our need to be right, we actually become right in a new and far deeper sense.

For Paul, this was the gift that God shared in the giving of “the Law” to the Jews, and also in Christ, whose life was given “as an atoning sacrifice.” It is not a righteousness that comes from within...it is an imputed righteousness that comes by grace. It is not a righteousness we earn to satisfy our ego. We cannot say, “look, I did that and I am right.” It is a righteousness declared by God that is not of our doing. This is beyond our control -a gift. Paul understood that the gift of Christ was a once and for all mending of fences. In Christ God declared his love for this world and for everyone in it in such a way that one’s self worth was not to be found in one’s own ability to prove themselves right -especially if their self-righteous gratification came at the disparagement and shaming of others.

In Christ, God lets go of the need to be right, instead God exhibits as deeper kind of righteousness. It is a righteousness that has a weight...a gravitas...a righteousness that is not self indulgent but is self-emptying. A righteousness witnessed to on a cross that revealed what happens when others in this world demand they be right. We see how the innocent truly suffer when people seek to be right. You see, the cross gives way to the righteousness of God. A righteousness that seeks to mend more than a bruised ego or satisfy one’s politics. It is the righteousness that ultimately leads to restoration, wellness and peace.

The activity of this righteousness is alluded to in the story of “Fences” -the famous play written by August Wilson.<sup>2</sup> Last year, Fences was released as a motion picture starring Denzell Washington. It is the story of a man named Troy. Troy is a frustrated, broken man -always ranting about something. A husband and a father whose ego had suffered in life and never

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<sup>2</sup> August Wilson, *Fences*, Penguin, New York: 1986.

seemed to get over the disappointments of past wrongs -taking out his frustrations on those around him in his quest to make himself right.

In the last scene of the story, the main character, Troy has died and his family is preparing for his funeral. Gathered together are Troy's widow Rose, their sons Sam and Cory and a seven year old girl named Raynell. Raynell became a part of the family because of an affair Troy had years earlier with Raynell's mother who died during child birth. If it sounds a little complicated, it is...a reminder sometimes of just how complicated we can make things in life.

Near the end of the story, Troy's son Cory, who had left home eight years earlier after a dispute with his father, has come back for the first time. He and his mother speak, and he tells her that he cannot go to his father's funeral. Cory gives his own rant about his father's behavior and treatment of him. To Cory, going to his father's funeral would be letting his father off the hook. It would mean Cory letting go of his own stubborn need to be right and how his father had been wrong and Cory cannot do that. He is a proud young man who has been working his way through the ranks of the Marines. He believes he is more right and a better man than his father ever was. Cory's mother Rose tells her son to put his anger aside and come to some peace about the whole thing. But peace and wellness appear to be elusive for Cory -they are far from him.

That is until Cory sits with Raynell...the child of his father's unfaithfulness, the sister he had never met before. They sit on the back step of their house. Together they do not rant, instead they sing a song that their now deceased father used to sing. A song about a dog named Blue. The final verse of the song is about Blue's funeral and ends with Blue "treeing possums in the Promised Land." The song their father used to sing was a song about becoming well and being set free. And as Raynell and Cory sang it together, they shared something with each other that brought them closer to one another. Even closer to their father who had shared it with them. It was a song that had nothing to do with being right or wrong. The song that Cory and Raynell sang together, a song given to them by their father, moved them beyond the need to be right to a deeper place of connection. It had to do with being well and finding peace just by being together.

And this my friends is the same kind of wellness God desires us to have. with each other. The deeper righteousness we receive in Christ by faith, is not a rant but a song shared by God. This was Paul's message to the Christians in Rome...be them Jew or Gentile. It was the song given to draw them closer together and us closer together. For them to let go of their need to be right and for us to let go of our own need to be right. For them to find their wellness and peace and for us to find our deeper wellness and peace.