

“Pursue Righteousness”

1 Timothy 6:6-19

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In 1962, Euell Gibbons published a book titled, Stalking the Wild Asparagus. As a young high school student at that time, this title conjured up a fanciful image of a whiskered old geezer tiptoeing through the meadows with a telephoto lens and a gunny sack. It actually made me curious about asparagus, a vegetable I had shunned previously. And the idea of stalking it appealed mightily to my imagination. If stalking this strong-tasting veggie meant so much to Euell Gibbons, maybe I should pay attention.

I thought of this quirky title as I read Paul’s Letter to Timothy urging him to “pursue righteousness.” Righteousness is worth pursuing. It can be elusive. It can be camouflaged as something else. But, like asparagus, it has a distinctive taste; it has certain qualities that are unmistakable and worthy of pursuit, even hot pursuit.

When I think of pursuing righteousness, three things come instantly to mind. The first is the mending of fences. Righteousness has to do with being in a right relationship with our neighbors, with our classmates, with our siblings, with our God. All these relationships are fragile, easily broken or fractured or neglected. To pursue righteousness is to make these relationships a priority. Perhaps a word of forgiveness is needed. Perhaps an invitation is warranted.

This is basically what Jesus says to Zacchaeus, the short-of-stature tax collector who has cheated all his friends and now finds himself exceedingly lonely. Go and mend the fences.

Tend to these primal relationships. Pursue righteousness. Zacchaeus does as Jesus instructs and finds that a feeling of salvation wells up within him. If we have fences to mend, relationships to heal, let's take the Apostle Paul's advice and get going! For this is what it means to pursue righteousness.

The second thing that comes to mind is to pursue a right relationship with the earth. Psalm 24 begins: "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it." When I read this verse, I become conscious of my responsibility for being a steward of the soil and the water and the air, a caretaker of the earth. Many of you know I take frequent walks through Cotton Hollow. In addition to appreciating the sound of the brook and the beauty of the rocks and trees; I also take a large plastic bag for picking up the litter I stumble upon. I had no idea there were so many kinds of whisky! So many brands of beer! So many kinds of snack wrappers. So many discarded socks and towels and diapers. The harvest of litter is stunning.

When Paul writes to Timothy to pursue righteousness, he may have in mind the fragile nature of the earth. Sometimes, I stand outside on a dark night and just stare at the moon and the stars, and wonder about the miraculous combination of molecules that comprise the atmosphere and the water and the eco-systems. I marvel that this is all a gift placed in our hands. And I tremble at the thought of taking this gift for granted. To pursue righteousness is to own a responsibility for the health of the earth. Pete Seeger comes to mind. John Muir. Aldo Leopold. My personal heroic figure is Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan woman who won the Nobel Peace prize for overseeing the planting of millions of trees in her homeland. To pursue righteousness is to walk softly upon the earth, to be in a right relationship with the ground beneath our feet.

The third thing that comes to mind is to pursue an attitude of gratitude. The Apostle Paul's own life took a dramatic turn when he chose to empty his heart of resentment, and to fill it, instead, with gratitude. He had a rather dramatic encounter with the risen Christ. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" As Saul let go of his resentments and embraced a spirit of gratitude, he felt like such a new person that he changed his name to Paul, Paul the Grateful one!

In our home, growing up, we were taught to write thank-you notes. We wrote thank-you notes for gifts received on birthdays, for acts of kindness, for educational experiences. I can remember my mother insisting I sit right down and write a letter to Mr. Dellert who was our band director and who had introduced me to the tenor saxophone. I can almost replicate the content of that seventh grade letter because I gave it so much thought. I am forever grateful to my mother for having shaped my soul in this way, for having instilled in me a passion for saying thank-you.

As soon as one gets off the airplane in Lilongwe, Malawi, one hears the Chichewa word, "zikomo," spoken constantly. Every other sentence is decorated with this three syllable word that means 'thank you.' The word 'zikomo' is then typically followed by what I would describe as a thank-you handshake, and a thank-you smile. The whole culture reeks of gratitude. Gratitude rubs off on everyone who travels there. To pursue righteousness is to allow one's heart to fill up with gratitude. This makes all the difference! Gratitude transforms conflict. Gratitude transforms anxiety. Gratitude draws one closer to God.

This First Letter of Paul to Timothy is worthy of our wrestling. Pursue righteousness. It is this pursuit rather than any other pursuit that allows us to live our days in the greatest of hope. Amen.

