**Weekend of Sunday, February 5, 2023**

**5th Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 5/Year A**

**First Reading: Isaiah 58:1-9a**

**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 [13-16]**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:13-20**

**Sermon Title: *“Be Salt and Light”***

**Theme**

*Light shines in the darkness for the upright, the psalmist sings. Isaiah declares that when we loose the bonds of injustice and share our bread with the hungry, the light breaks forth like the dawn. In another passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, the light of the world, calls his followers to let the light of their good works shine before others. Through baptism we are sent into the world to shine with the light of Christ.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 58:1-9a [9b-12]**

*Shortly after the return of Israel from exile in Babylon, the people were troubled by the ineffectiveness of their fasts. God reminds them that outward observance is no substitute for genuine fasting that results in acts of justice, such as feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and clothing the naked.*

1Shout out, do not hold back!  
  Lift up your voice like a trumpet!  
 Announce to my people their rebellion,  
  to the house of Jacob their sins.  
 2Yet day after day they seek me  
  and delight to know my ways,  
 as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
  and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
 they ask of me righteous judgments,  
  they delight to draw near to God.  
 3“Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
  Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”  
 Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,  
  and oppress all your workers.  
 4Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
  and to strike with a wicked fist.  
 Such fasting as you do today  
  will not make your voice heard on high.  
 5Is such the fast that I choose,  
  a day to humble oneself?  
 Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
  and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
 Will you call this a fast,  
  a day acceptable to the Lord?  
  
 6Is not this the fast that I choose:  
  to loose the bonds of injustice,  
  to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
 to let the oppressed go free,  
  and to break every yoke?  
 7Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
  and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
 when you see the naked, to cover them,  
  and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
 8Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
  and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
 your vindicator shall go before you,  
  the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.  
 9aThen you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
  you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

[ 9bIf you remove the yoke from among you,  
  the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
 10if you offer your food to the hungry  
  and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
 then your light shall rise in the darkness  
  and your gloom be like the noonday.  
 11The Lord will guide you continually,  
  and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
  and make your bones strong;  
 and you shall be like a watered garden,  
  like a spring of water,  
  whose waters never fail.  
 12Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
  you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
 you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
  the restorer of streets to live in.]

**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 [13-16]**

*Though people such as the Corinthians are enamored with human philosophy and wisdom, Paul continuously presents God’s hidden wisdom which is Jesus Christ crucified. True spiritual maturity involves judging ourselves and others in light of God’s revelation in the cross.*

1When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. 2For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. 4My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.  
 6Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. 7But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9But, as it is written,   
 “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
  nor the human heart conceived,  
 what God has prepared for those who love him”—  
10these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God. 12Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. [13And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.  
 14Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. 15Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny.  
 16“For who has known the mind of the Lord  
  so as to instruct him?”  
But we have the mind of Christ.]

**Gospel: Matthew 5:13-20**

*In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages his followers to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, doing good works and keeping God’s commandments.*

[Jesus said:] 13“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.  
 14“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.  
 17“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

**Sermon**

In the Gospel Reading last weekend, we found Jesus on a mountainside teaching the crowds. And as you recall, he began his sermon with the Beatitudes, which were included in the Gospel Reading for last weekend. Today’s Gospel Reading is a continuation of that sermon and it contains some of my favorite expressions of Jesus.

In my sermon last weekend, I mentioned that

“Most of us do not live our lives to some grand high-sounding creed, or mission statement. Most of us don’t even live our lives based on the directives of scripture. Simply, we live based on “what works.” Am I right?”

True confession: I actually do have a personal mission and vision statement including a personal slogan. I wrote it in a class I taught years ago, which I thought was fantastic. One of the bullet points of the Vision Statement is:

I am salt and light for myself, my family, friends, neighbors, and people I have not yet met.

Slogan: “Be salt and light.”

And my slogan is “Be salt and light.”

If you asked me if I’ve always lived according to this Mission and Vision statement and slogan guiding my every thought and deed since writing it, I would have to confess that no, I don’t think so, but you would be a better judge than I would be. But I will tell you this: Though it is not always at the forefront of my consciousness, I have never forgotten it. And I know that when I do not live up to the standard I have established for myself, there is grace for that. I confess my shortcomings and try to do better.

Because of my love for the first part of this passage, verses 13-16, I have preached on it several times. But I tend to overlook the second part of this passage, verses 17-20 because it can appear troublesome. Let’s take a look.

Although it is only chapter five of Matthew’s Gospel, we need to remember that Matthew told and re-told his Gospel as his way of telling the Good News from his perspective to a primarily Jewish Christian audience. For example, when he referred to the Law, those of a Jewish background knew what he was talking about. They had struggled to attain righteousness by obeying the Law their entire Jewish lives.

As Matthew understood Jesus, Jesus wanted to be sure that he was understood as the long-awaited Messiah of God; the *fulfillment* of the promises and prophecies of God, not something new and completely removed from Judaism. And so, as I said, Jesus’s tone seemed to shift in verse 17 and following.

17“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

After the Beatitudes that Jesus had just delivered moments earlier, I imagine that some of those peasants in the crowd, who were oppressed by the weight of the Law, immediately liked Jesus. “Yea, finally someone who understands what it is like to be us!” they must have thought. Many of them were not wealthy enough to comply with every item of the Law of Moses, and that put them on the outside of Judaism looking in.

But, no doubt others came out to hear him: the scribes, elders, members of the priesthood, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees. These are subgroups of Judaism that are on the inside judging those on the outside. Although they didn’t get along with each other, they agreed that the Law of Moses was the guide for their lives. However, over the next three-plus years, the disagreement on the purpose of the Law will continue to separate Jesus and the religious establishment and make them enemies.

No doubt, Jesus’s lovely Beatitudes were well-received by the peasant class. But the religious establishment must have been scratching their heads. “Platitudes!” they must have thought. “He’s preaching platitudes.” “The Law was given to govern our lives.”

The Jews understood the Law to have three purposes:

* Ceremonial Law describes how the Hebrew/Israelite/Jewish people are to worship God.
* Civil Law applies to daily life. As God’s “Chosen People,” coming out of Egyptian captivity, God gave them the Law to give them order, unlike any other nation.
* Moral Law is the direct command of God, and it requires strict obedience. The Moral Law reveals the nature and will of God.

Every learned first-century Jew, including Jesus, knew this and Jesus did not argue that the Law didn’t apply to him or his growing following. On the contrary, he said, 17“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

Is it just me, or when you read that passage, do you also hear Jesus amping it up? If you read ahead further into the Sermon on the Mount, I think it could be argued that Jesus got increasingly angry. And why would that be? I have my ideas.

You know how Jesus could tell what others were thinking? Jesus may have sensed the religious establishment in the crowd was already arguing with him over everything they knew to be true. I am speculating.

But here is my point: I have told you a hundred times in my years as your pastor that one of Jesus’s objectives was to straighten out the truth about the true loving nature of his Heavenly Father and our Heavenly Father.

Ever since Moses delivered the Ten Commandments, the Jews have understood it to be a formula for godly living, and that is true, except when the object of their devotion becomes the Law and not the giver of the Law.

One could argue that Jesus was affirming the religious establishment with his words;

20I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

But what Jesus was really doing was pointing out that no one, not even the Pharisees with all their Law-keeping, can attain righteousness. He went on like this for three more chapters, pointing out to those who have ears to hear, that no one will make it into the Kingdom of Heaven, because no one can attain righteousness.

Well, then, what to do?

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

The religious establishment knew only one way to be, strict adherence to the Law. But what they were missing was what Jesus spent his life trying to demonstrate. The God of the Jews is not the malevolent scorekeeper tabulating every act of disobedience to the Law.

Jesus’s Heavenly Father gave us the Law out of love to order our days so we can live godly lives and be a light to others. Jesus taught that the Jews were missing the true spirit of the law, which is love.

All God's followers must follow that Law. And more importantly, we must embody the love and compassion that is at the heart of the Law, which is what Jesus taught. And when we mess up, there is grace for that. We confess our mistakes and commit to doing better. God loves that when we do that.

So let us remember that as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, we have a great responsibility to live this gift of life to the fullest, doing our level best to live holy and godly lives. That is living boldly, as Martin Luther would have said, and letting our good deeds glorify our Father in heaven. Let us strive for the righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees, driven by love and compassion for all, knowing that there is grace for when we fail.

**Prayer**

Lord God, with endless mercy you receive the prayers of all who call upon you. By your Spirit show us the things we ought to do, and give us the grace and power to do them, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen