

“Blessed to Be” 2-5-17

Isaiah 58:1-11

Matthew 5:13-20

I find myself asking a lot of questions these days. What is the most effective role of the church in this present moment? How do we comprehend Jesus' teaching and become the people he is calling us to be? How do we unpack what it means to be righteous in terms of how Jesus describes it? What does a righteous person look like?

We all have our stereo-typical images of what a righteous person might look and act like. Both Isaiah and Jesus challenge our conventional understanding. Both address a religious people. Isaiah's contemporaries were regular worship attenders, interested in knowing God and God's ways. They were tithers, delighting to “draw near to God” and “not forsake the ordinance of God”. They practiced fasting so regularly that they asked God, “Why do we fast, but you do not see?” Since they weren't getting any results they asked God, “Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

God's response is that there is a way of being religious that is mocking the religion they were professing. Self-interest, not God-interest obsessed their hearts. How can that happen? God through the prophet lays out the issues: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, 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....Is not this the fast 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? Is 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?”

They had forgotten who and what they were supposed to be about. The true meaning of a faith life is eluding them. Haven't you ever found yourself lost amidst the formalities of religion? Where is God in all of this? What am I supposed to do? Who am I supposed to be? “

We are facing identity questions as a nation this morning. The president issues an executive order on immigration policy and we awake and say, “Hey, this is not who we are!” People around the world speak out and say, “This is not the America we know!” Has something been awakened deep down that we have forgotten about as we have been living our lives? People and families in our ESL program are being affected, filled with fear and tears, wondering if they will be deported or see their families again. In seeking to protect our borders, have we lost our perspective and compassion?

As G. K. Chesterton observed; “It is always simple to fall: there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands” (Yancey, ‘Grace Notes’, p.258). Jesus is pointing us to the one that stands.

Jesus bestows an identity upon us. His disciples, blessed for who they are, are further blessed as they live in this world as peacemakers, merciful in their actions, and non-violent in their response to living Jesus' way. Jesus calls them and us salt and light. Note that Jesus didn't say, "Try and be salt and light". Jesus says, "This is who you are", not what you should be. And so our identity is a gift of grace. He makes us into something and then tells us to live into these realities. Jesus is always reminding us to "become what you are". Jesus is honoring us and loving us.

In Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland', Alice encounters the Cheshire Cat. Not sure which road to take, Alice asks the cat which is the right way to go.

The cat responds, "Where are you going?" Alice admits she isn't sure. The Cat sardonically replies: "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there" (Homiletics, Jan.-Feb., p.57).

Jesus puts us on the road and says, "This is where you are going. This is who you are".

Our power in the world lies in our difference from it. As salt acts as a preservative to food and adds flavor, Christ's followers flavor life, preserve truth, and rejuvenate those around them. It is to say that who we are and how we act effects the people around us. As a church we take this seriously. Jesus is using us to love and help the people around us. Salt does not exist for itself. As its main purpose is to penetrate food, so the Christian neither exists for him or herself, but to penetrate society with the flavor of Jesus' life and Spirit. So Jesus rightly frames a question for us to think about; "But if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" A Christian community not living for others isn't worth much. That is why we keep pressing the question corporately and individually as to what God is asking us to do.

I still to this day remember being in conversation with God, asking what my life was to be about. That is not unusual for a 21 year old seeking an identity and a purpose for living. Passively watching a movie in a Lubbock, Texas theatre, a verse from 1 Corinthians 6:20 came unannounced into my head, "...you are not your own...For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body". We exist for others, not ourselves. That is God's way.

Light is another metaphor. Jesus himself is called the Light of the Nations in Matthew 4:16. When we face the light of Christ we reflect his light in this world, just as he reflected the Father's light on earth. The property of light illumines. Light provides energy, warmth, and encourages growth, giving life to things. No wonder Jesus says, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to the house".

The righteousness Christ imparts to us looks like this: We are open and honest instead of hiding in the dark; we can offer people warmth and encouragement rather than being cold, providing hope rather than discouragement; and being a source of life giving energy to others through Christ's grace whose love invites and draws others into a larger circle of growth and change (Homiletics, p.44). Our job is to match our actions, mission, and ministry to Christ's life at work in and through us. Our part is to know where to go and what to do as the salt and light. We receive the blessing and live into the command to be the salt and light of Christ in this world. "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven".

People see God through you and me. What we do gives glory to God, drawing attention away from us to what God is doing through us. The way we live out Christ's call is as important as what we do. In actuality, the purpose of life is the glory of God, "to remove the veil from the Father's face and to display something of God's glory to the world" (Brunner, 'Matthew Commentary', p.192).

Not that this is easy. The people of Israel in Isaiah's day had lost their way. So had the religious leaders of Jesus' day. They had wandered off the trail of God's way of righteousness. They had redefined righteousness as careful attention to rules and regulations, right theology coupled with a passionate devotion to the law. In doing so they were obscuring God's glory to the world, not revealing it.

What had they forgotten? They had "neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith". The forest had been lost through the trees. They had forgotten that the true fast was to lose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house, cover the naked, and take care of their families.

Jesus had to say, "Wait a minute. Stop accusing me of abolishing the law and prophets. I have come to fulfill them. Heed the authority and unbreakable line of scripture on this. I am upholding scripture, not undermining it, and you should to". Then he turns to us and says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven".

Sometimes the light of Christ shining through us reveals the darkness around us. As he sat in a jail, Southern pastors were denouncing MLK as a communist while policemen were swinging nightsticks at his unarmed supporters outside his jail cell. However, the light of Christ in him moved him to oppose policies, not persons. Christ directed him to counter violence with non-violence, and hatred with love. He writes in his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail"; "Let us not seek to justify our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force" (Yancey, p.260). Is this not God's invitation to us this morning?

Christian entrepreneur John Rush in 2012 launched ClearTurn Enterprises, a demolition service and cleaning company. Raised in poverty, he says, "I realized that part of the Christian faith is the integration into everyday life...It's more than talking about Christian ideas; it's about policy, community development, substance abuse, human trafficking, racial discrimination, poverty".

Putting his faith into the practice of Christ's righteousness, he decided his business would provide jobs and job training for people who had significant challenges in their pasts, such as incarceration, drug addiction, alcoholism, and intergenerational poverty. He feels that these people are being punished for their weaknesses, and he wanted to help them turn their lives around. He has hired more than 400 people who have learned specific job skills plus the relational ability necessary to get a job and keep it (Sojourners, Dec. 2016, pp. 32-34).

God tells us through Isaiah, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of injustice?" To us Jesus says, "You are the salt...You are the light of the world...For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven".

