

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 58: 1-12
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 5:13-20
February 5, 2023
ORDINARY COMMUNION

“How Real Faith Looks”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The people Isaiah addressed thought that they were very religious. They thought they were doing everything right. In fact, they were so convinced that they were doing their part that they became quite indignant at the fact that God seemed to not be paying attention. *Here we are fasting and praying and humbling ourselves, Lord, and you haven't even noticed!*

But God was paying attention, and God was not impressed. We can act very religious. We can carry out all manner of religious activities. But because of the spirit in which they are done, those activities can have nothing to do with God. Going to church, leading worship, partaking in communion, or in this case participating in an organized fast to seek God's blessing, while at the same time living in a way that oppresses others, does not fly with God. These people paid attention to the ritual aspects of the law, while ignoring its ethical demands.

This isn't unusual. And it isn't limited to the ancient world. People have always done this. The human race is very skilled at focusing on the external form of things in order to avoid looking at the much harder demands of the heart. But God expects us to live out our faith in the very real social and economic world we live in. The kind of fasting that God wants is to “loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke . . .” It is to “share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood.”

Real faith reaches way beyond church walls into life that is everywhere around us. And the demands God places on us are at every level. We are to work in the more distant realm of trying to exert pressure on governments and corporations to loose the chains of injustice and help the oppressed. Yes, God really does want us to work for fair labor laws and to make sure that we are not supporting sweat shops in third world countries to make luxury goods. God really does want us to do something about the impoverished children in Africa scavenging for anything they can resell and putting their lives at risk from the piles of trash dumped from the United States in their country. God does want us to work for clean safe drinking water for people we have never met. And God really does want us to “provide the poor wanderer with shelter,” even if that “poor wanderer” speaks a different language and came across our borders illegally. God is not concerned about that. God is concerned about showing

compassion and providing food and shelter to those in need. And it is also significant to note that God does not want us to turn our backs on our own needy family members. The fact that this needs to be said points to the universality of the situation. Everyone has that one person in their family with huge needs. We may want to cross the street when we see Aunt Harriet coming, but God tells us not to. And when we live as God wants us to live the Lord says, “your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear.”

Jesus’ teaching in Matthew approaches the same truth from a different angle. He begins by saying, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”

Salt is the only mineral that we take directly from the earth and eat. Our bodies cannot survive without salt. The most ancient prehistoric roads were built to transport salt and salt was one of the first things to be taxed. As late as 1930 Gandhi used salt as a means to defy the British and break the colonial hold over India. Salt enhances. Salt preserves. But salt only works if you use it. You have to mix it in.

I can cook a beautiful meal and add no salt. Those on a low sodium diet might appreciate it. But even they would try to find something to take the place of salt, because everything tastes better with it. That’s the way we are created. Our bodies crave it. But because salt needs to be mixed in, if I am salt, I also need to be mixed in. I can’t make a difference in the world if I am not there.

I can understand the desire to withdraw into our own safe little world. I think the pandemic has affected a lot of us that way. Being cut off for a year and then emerging slowly has changed people. It’s not like snapping our fingers and everything is like it was before the pandemic. Even though everything is now open, we are still wary. I confess my natural introverted side has become much stronger. An introvert? Pastor Lisa??? Afraid so. When I did all those days of psychological testing for the ministry years ago, I discovered I am right on the line between introvert and extravert, and the pandemic definitely shifted me into the introverted side. But I don’t think I’m unique. I think we all feel the strain of engaging with the world right now. Jesus doesn’t say that we should **strive** to be the salt of the earth, however. He says we are the salt of the earth. As inadequate as we may feel, who we are in Christ will have an impact if we live faithfully.

Jesus also said, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

We are the light of the world. We have been given the task of bringing light into dark places. Hiding the fact that we are Christians makes about as much sense as covering a light with a bushel basket. Lights have a purpose, and they have to be uncovered for them to work. And yet we shy away from this too. The reason is simple. We don’t want people to mistake us for the fundamentalist caricature that presents itself on our television sets and in

social media. We don't want to be mistaken for people who judge and condemn, who are homophobic and xenophobic. And we also don't want to be mocked by those who consider themselves far too intelligent to believe in God. But none of this is an excuse, because the best way for light to work is for people to SEE the difference. To be the light does not mean we have to start preaching to our co-workers or leave unwanted tracts laying around. It means living with such integrity and grace that they can see the difference, and responding openly about our faith when asked. We don't even have to have all the answers. The person who claims they can provide all the answers is part of a cult. Real faith is faith: "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11: 1)

After Jesus spoke of salt and light, he then said something that is disturbing, confusing and alarming all at once. The very same man who defied the Pharisees for their obsession with ritual matters said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. . . For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Well, we're all out of luck then, aren't we? Not one of us here keeps the dietary and ceremonial laws found in the Old Testament! But if we truly pay attention to the teachings of Jesus, legalism does not seem to be his concern. Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, defended his disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath and defended them again when they failed to observe ritual handwashing. Having a righteousness that exceeds the Pharisees doesn't seem to mean being legally perfect. Being outwardly religious but inwardly cold does not make us right with God. Nor does being judgmental towards others. Jesus was not about condemnation. He did not come to condemn the world but to save it. Jesus is about justice and mercy, and living in a radically different way, a way in which we love our enemies and do good to those who harm us. A way that is humble and full of grace.

Real faith is life changing. But there is a strong current in American Christianity that actively works against our becoming the people God wants us to be. Just this week a television show was on in the background that I wasn't paying much attention to. Suddenly I checked in. A young woman became pregnant out of wedlock and her family refused to come when she went into labor. "Maybe they are Christians," said one of the characters. Can we imagine that we have distorted Christ's message so much that this is what people think of Christians? And it's not entirely wrong. I know a couple who were evicted from their church for refusing to throw their pregnant daughter out.

Along with the self-righteousness is the self-centeredness. Faith is about what God can do for ME. It's about being me being inspired and entertained on a Sunday morning. Even when the most devout among us talk about Jesus dying on the cross the emphasis is on the individual. It's MY sins are gone and I'VE been set free. And while it is important to show gratitude to God for that, it's not really all about me, it's all about US. God cares deeply about how we treat one another, about how we are to live to help and not bring harm to others who share this planet with us.

We can refuse to go along with a form of Christianity that seems to have left the teachings of Jesus behind. We can actively seek to live the way Jesus calls us to live. And that is a life-changing witness. **That** is the light that will bring people back to God. They will know we are Christians not by our harsh judgments and self-righteousness, but **by our love**. Amen

Isaiah 58: 1-12

58 “Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion

and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

2 For day after day they seek me out;

they seem eager to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that does what is right

and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions

and seem eager for God to come near them.

3 ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,

‘and you have not seen it?’

Why have we humbled ourselves,

and you have not noticed?’

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please

and exploit all your workers.

4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,

and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today

and expect your voice to be heard on high.

5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,

only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed

and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast,

a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness will go before you,

and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
⁹ Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.
“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.
¹¹ The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.
¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.
¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.
¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.