

Salt and Light

Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20
February 6, 2011 – Browns Point UMC
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I traveled to Atlanta unexpectedly this week with my young daughter, and lost much of the time I would have spent preparing a sermon. As such, what I offer today is less a formal sermon and more “the pastor’s thoughts on today’s lectionary texts.” I pray that the Holy Spirit will use these thoughts to challenge and encourage you, despite their informality.

I have to tell you that these spiritual practice groups we’ve been having on Wednesday nights have really been good for me. Our conversations have challenged me to deepen my faith in intentional ways. One of the things I’ve been thinking about and working on for months is part of the spiritual practice of celebration: I’ve been trying not to complain. Now, I know it’s a surprise to you that your near-perfect pastor would ever gripe about anything, but it’s true. And it’s *especially* true when we pastors get together with each other. I do not know what it is – some kind of evil spell, perhaps – but when pastors get together, even if ministry is going *incredibly* well in their settings and they were feeling on top of the world before they gathered with these colleagues, it seems inevitable that they start complaining... sometimes about their spouses or district superintendents or the denomination as a whole, but usually about their congregations.

Today’s reading from Isaiah makes me feel slightly better that this is a problem for us pastors, because Isaiah seems to be complaining about his congregation, too. And the problem? They can hardly wait to get themselves out of bed – even on football days – and get to church. He says they’re seeking God all the time, day after day. They are fasting and worshipping all the time, and they *delight* in knowing God’s ways. Doesn’t that sound just awful? Isaiah doesn’t seem to catch the irony that this is the mainline Protestant pastor’s *dream*: the congregation that cannot wait to get to worship. Can you imagine this at a monthly pastor’s meeting? “Ugh, my congregation is so fickle.” “Oh, I know what you mean – mine just doesn’t want to commit to anything.” “Our finances are going down the tubes.” And then Isaiah says, “Seriously, my people are just at church all the dang time.” Hmmm...

And yet, something is missing. Isaiah says that these folks are in worship, but that’s it. They’re *doing* worship, they’re engaging in the practices that have been commanded, but they have yet to let themselves be formed by worship, transformed by spiritual practice, and changed into people of God.

One of the questions that I’ve been asked pretty regularly since moving here from the Bible Belt is how church leadership and participation are different between the two regions. And I think most people who ask this are expecting I’ll say something about how startling it is or difficult that people in the NW don’t go to church as much as people in the south – some kind of moral judgment on the “none zone.” But usually I comment about how refreshing it is to be in a place where going to church *isn’t* a cultural norm. People don’t go to church because everyone else goes to church, or because you’ll be judged if you don’t go to church, or because that’s the place in town to see and be seen. People here seem to go to church because they want to be in church, because they care about what they’re hearing and how it might form them in their faith... because they want to be the people of God.

And I think the difference I've witnessed between the regions is not unlike what Isaiah is talking about in today's text: Isaiah's complaining about these church-goers because they're just going through the motions. They're so concerned about right worship that they have become obsessed with the practice and it isn't changing who they are. It's meaningless, because all their posturing is divorced from lives of righteousness. They're just going to church to go to church, not to transform themselves or the world.

One of the things we discussed in our most recent Avenues gathering on Wednesday night is how our practice is supposed to be wed to *obedience*. We don't pray and meditate and fast because we want to feel better or because it makes God happy. We do those things because it brings us into closer relationship with God, it forms us into God's people, and it challenges us to obey God's laws and follow God's will for our lives. The folks Isaiah is referring to didn't let the practice change them: they were pious on the outside, and hypocrites the rest of the way through. They didn't work for justice. They didn't advocate for the oppressed. They didn't share their food with the hungry or bring the homeless into their own houses. And Isaiah says *that* is the kind of piety God is looking for: *that* is what makes light break forth like the dawn and light rise in the darkness. That kind of work for justice is what makes us like the watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail.

There are similar themes in the story from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, as well. [This is one of those great days when the lectionary texts kind of go together!] We're reminded by Jesus in these familiar verses that we are called to be salt and light for the earth: not just to participate in ritual and feel good about ourselves, but challenge the status quo and improve life as we know it.

Salt is one of those edgy things that I'm not always sure about: it seems like most people are either salt people or sweet people – and I am a sweet person (obviously!). Too much salt will just cut away at the roof of my mouth, you know? But salt also makes flavors come alive: have you tried to make chocolate chip cookies without salt? Gross. Salt preserves food for long periods; it makes things last. It stimulates our thirst. It brings goodness out of food that might not otherwise be so good. It keeps our bodies in motion. I don't know about you, but I practically dream about those salted caramels from Fran's in Seattle- the same ones that President Obama famously likes and the ones that have been on Oprah's favorite things. I don't like caramel in general – but with a little salt, it is like a bite of heaven. And what does it mean that Jesus says we are to be salt, too, eliciting goodness from the world, and in a great sense, keeping it alive?

And then he says we are the light of the world, a city on a hill that cannot be hid. Often the first thing we think about in hearing these verses is the song we sing every week for the children: this little light of mine, I'm gonna' let it shine. But I like to think that the reason Jesus gave us these two metaphors together is to balance one another. We can be salt on our own, mixing into the rest of life to add flavor and elicit goodness. But this metaphor about being the light of the world is inherently communitarian. A *city* on a hill cannot be hid, though perhaps one light could be. This is about the community we are together as the Church. We are called *together* to give light to the world, helping things to grow, giving color and life and beauty. But the light doesn't come from ourselves – it comes from God. Assuming we are aimed at God and close enough to God for the light to be strong in us, we refract God's light for others to see. We shine light into darkness – because we all know there *is* darkness in the world. But we cannot shine light into the darkness without going into the darkness ourselves. It won't do us much good to shine light all over each other standing here together on Sunday mornings. We'll just blind each other. Or our

light will be so diffused we'll hardly be able to see it at all. But if you've ever lit a match in the dead of night, you know what a difference light can make. You have to be willing to go into the darkness to shine God's light.

I haven't been able to keep up with all the news about Egypt this week, but I have been moved by the photos that are out this morning that show Christians lining up putting themselves in danger so their Muslim friends and neighbors can pray peacefully. The Christians are holding hands with their backs to their friends, looking out for soldiers or protesters or counter-protesters, protecting the space wherein their friends can get in touch with the sacred. This is the kind of thing I think Jesus meant when he said for us to be the light of the world. It's not so much about gathering here and congratulating ourselves on being an excellent church full of really wonderful people – though we *are* an excellent church full of really wonderful people. It's about allowing our gatherings here, and our practices of spiritual disciplines at home and in small groups, to transform us into people who go into the world's dark and bland places to be light and salt, to work for justice and transform the world. This sanctuary is the place where faith begins, not where it ends. This is the place where we learn how to be Christians, not where we live out our whole Christian lives.

I read a story this week about a rabbi who was praying and walking, wandering through a forest, and he accidentally wandered up on a military base, where a guard startled him from his deep thoughts by shouting, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" The rabbi replied by asking, "How much do they pay you?" The guard, skeptical of the rabbi's question, responded with, "Why do you ask?" "Because," the rabbi answered, "I need someone to ask me those questions every day."

And I think that's what our texts for today do for us: these are texts that ask who we are and what we're doing here. What is our identity and how is that related to our behavior? Are we actors playing a part? Are we children of God seeking to transform the world? Somewhere in between? What are we doing here? Have we come to see and be seen? To make ourselves feel good? To have a better week? To check 'religious practice' off the list? Or have we come to be transformed by the living God, so we can be salt and light for the earth? Who are we? Why are we here?