

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 6, 2011
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Scriptures: Isaiah 58:1-9a, Psalm 112:1-9, 1Corinthians 2:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

You Are Salt and Light

At the point where we pick up today's reading from Isaiah, the Israelites have returned from their exile in Babylon. Now that they are back in the land that God has promised to give to them, they have set themselves upon rebuilding what they had lost. They are rebuilding the city, they are rebuilding the temple, they are rebuilding their lives, they are rebuilding their relationship with God. Isn't that what you do when you've been through trial and suffering? Often, when we go through rough times in our lives, we are at odds with things that are supposed to sustain us and help us. That was the case of the people of God. While they were in exile, they struggled to understand the presence of God in the middle of their suffering. Now that things are "back to normal" they want to make sure that things are set straight this time around. So they dedicate themselves, with even more zeal than before, to observe the law and live a righteous life before God. They were intent on observing the Law to the "T" and not fail in any of its precepts. So, among many other things, they fast. They offer their sacrifice to God. They mortify their bodies as a way of saying "we're sorry" and to ensure a better future for the people.

But something seems to be wrong. They are not getting praise for their sacrifice, they are not receiving credit for their offering. Instead of God's pleasure, they hear judgment and indictment. This is not the way they planned it. What's going on here? "It must be God who is not keeping his end of the bargain," they seem to think. With irony they ask "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" They seem to be confused and dazzled. Because in reality, they think, if we fast and humble ourselves we should earn God's favor, not condemnation. Indeed it must have been quite a shock to hear the prophet's strong rebuke of their faithful acts. How could God not be pleased?

What's happening is that the emphasis is set on the wrong place. They are so very eager in rebuilding what they had lost with God that they forgot to rebuild what they had lost among themselves. They want to rebuild their relationship with God when they should have been rebuilding their relationships with each other. Yes, this is about rebuilding relationships, but those that exist in their human community. We make a mistake if we think that we are in good standing with God when we do things to please him. "Do you think that's the kind of fasting God wants?" asks the prophet on God's name. "No, this is what God wants. That you loose the bonds of injustice, that you share what you have with those who have not, that you offer shelter to the stranger, that you give clothing to the naked, that you feed the hungry, that you help those that are afflicted." These are choices, this is a way of living, a different mindset that has the purpose of restoring broken relationships by doing justice.

Did you notice how that passage ends? It says “then” as in referring to what will happen when the people do what God expects from them. This is an “if-then” kind of pattern. Things will happen the way they were hoping for, if they did what God wanted from them first. *If* the people choose the fast God sets before them, *then* they will have the blessing they seek: light, healing, help, protection, satisfying of needs, and, most centrally, the presence and guidance of God among them. Does that sound wrong to you? Does that make you uneasy? Does it sound like salvation by works? Well, it can certainly be understood like that, but think about this. How can you expect to have a full relationship with God if you don’t have a just relationship with your neighbor? Said differently, in the words of John, you can’t say that you love God if you don’t love your neighbor (1 John 4:20). What the prophet is talking about is not justification by good deeds, but life according to the kingdom of God. The “if-then” pattern is not about rewards, but about living in such a way that it reflects what you say you believe. If we say we believe in having a right relationship with God, it must very naturally include living in such a way that we have a right relationship with our neighbor. And that right relationship can’t happen when there is injustice in the world. When people are hungry, oppressed, destitute, forgotten, lonely there is injustice. The fasting the people of God were doing was not conducive to eliminating that injustice. And because they were not doing justice they couldn’t have a right relationship with their neighbors. And because their relationship with their neighbor was broken their relationship with God was broken as well. They were doing the action but they were not living it.

Why all this lengthy, complicated, perhaps confusing explanation? Because that’s what Jesus means to us when he says “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.” Salt is only good as long as it retains its properties. What good is it if salt is not able to give flavor to our food or act as a preservative among the many other uses it has? What if for some reason to put salt on your food and still it doesn’t taste good? And then there is light. What if you flip the light switch on but unscrew the light bulb from the socket? What if you light a fire on these cold winter days, but then put a bookcase in front of the fireplace? What good does it do if we say we believe in God but live in such a way that it doesn’t show? If we come to church, and read the Bible, and bring offerings, and pray until we are exhausted but don’t look out for our neighbor, does that glorify God?

As we said with the beatitudes last week, this is not a prescription for life but a description of life. The “if-then” pattern is not intended to be a “do this to get that” thing. Maybe we can understand it better if we think about it as “because-therefore” relationship. You see, Jesus is not saying “*if* you were salt and light” he is saying “*you are* salt and light.” Because we are salt and light, therefore we give flavor and we shed light. Because we are salt and light, therefore we love our neighbor. Because we are salt and light, therefore we live in such a way that others can see God in us. We can say that with confidence not because we are trying to boast ourselves, but because we are showing what God has done in us. In the end, Paul says to the Corinthians, the Spirit in us that allows us to do these things is not ours but God’s. We are not trying to save ourselves, nor are we getting brownie points before God. We are only doing what salt and light naturally do. Amen.