

A Epiphany 5 2.9.20

Matthew 5:13-20; Isaiah 58:1-12

Focus Statement: You are the light of the world.

We're in a section of readings for the next couple weeks that has us working our way through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. So before we get to today's reading, let's really quick recap what we heard Jesus say last week.

The Sermon on the Mount starts with the Beatitudes, this list of unexpected people whom Jesus calls blessed. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek. Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, who are merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted. And blessed are you, when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely.

Wait, what? It was one thing when Jesus was blessing all those unfortunate people, the poor, the meek, the mourning, but now it's getting personal. Blessed are you, Jesus said, when people revile you. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm not a huge fan of being reviled. Being reviled, persecuted, having falsehoods uttered about me, none of this feels like blessing to me.

And yet, Jesus said, we are blessed. We are blessed, as are the poor, the meek, the mourning, the hungry, the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers, we are blessed because people do not define our identity, and our identity is salt and light.

That's what Jesus declared in the first section of the reading we heard today. You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world. You. I noticed something new this week, which is the clarifiers Jesus put on these declarations are kind of ridiculous. Salt can't have its saltiness restored because salt can't lose its saltiness. Saltiness is in its chemical makeup; it is the defining characteristic of salt. And light shines, that's what it does. Notice you turn on a light, but you cannot turn on dark. Dark only exists in the absence of light, it has no definition outside of that relationship. And actually, verse fifteen gets even more extreme than that. The verse says, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket..." On first read we think, of course no one would do that, that would entirely defeat the purpose of having lit the lamp. But, think about what a lamp was in the first century, a lamp was something that was on fire. And if you put a bushel basket over a flame, you're eventually going to have a flaming bushel basket. Which would produce more light than just leaving the lamp lit in the first place. So when Jesus said, let your light shine, that isn't so much a command as it is an inevitability. You are light. Light shines. That's what it does.

Now, that's not to say that there isn't work to be done. That's not to say that we can just sit around and do nothing, or worse, catch things on fire. It's just to say that the starting point, the jumping off point for all that we do, is this solid, grounded, unshakeable identity as ones who are blessed by God, and who use that blessedness to bring light to the world.

So how do we do that? What does that look like? For that, we need Isaiah. Isaiah fifty-eight, like most of the other Isaiah readings we've heard recently, comes from the final

section of Isaiah after the people of Israel have returned from exile and are trying to learn to live again. This Isaiah passage is a little tricky at first because it starts with God announcing the rebellion of a people who “seek [God] and delight to know [God’s] ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness.” In other words, they think they’re doing everything right. They’re fasting, they’re humbling themselves, they’re knocking each other over in their shows of piety. To which God responds, that in and of itself is the problem. The problem is their piety is selfish, it’s self-centered. They are not fasting to please God or to serve their neighbor, they are fasting to make themselves look good, to draw attention to how great they are. Yes their light is shining, but not like a lamp on a lampstand, or even a flaming bushel basket burning out of control, their light is shining like a spotlight, illuminating only themselves. And so God calls them to a different kind of fast. A fast to “remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil...[to] offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted.” If you do these things, if you fast in this way, God says, “then your light shall rise from the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”

As Lutherans we, rightly, get a little concerned with this if/then language of faith. It is dangerously easy to read these words as requirements for salvation, the work necessary to get God to love us. But remember the identity we heard God declare to us in Matthew, the promise given to us at baptism, that we are blessed, we are salt, we are light. This ultimate conviction that we are God’s, that through Christ’s death and resurrection we are children of God, and nothing can change that. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, our faith rests “not on human wisdom but on the power of God.” With this identity of blessedness

firmly in our hearts, we can hear this fast for justice for what it is, not the entry fee to heaven, but a call to partnership with the God of the universe. Friends, that is faith, God's faith in us. God is not asking us to sit back and watch as God makes things good, God is inviting us into the work. God is inviting us to walk alongside God, to be God's hands and feet, heart and voice. To be "repairers of the breach, restorers of the streets to live in."

Dear friends in Christ, the work that we do in the world is the work of God. When we speak out against injustice, when we pray for those in need. When we put food in the wagon for the pantry, or listen to the story of the Co-op members, or offer a smile to someone who is hurting, these actions may feel small and insignificant, but this passage tells us that these actions are the very work of God. So let your light shine, dear people of God. Shine on.

Amen.