

GETTING CONVICTED

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Isaiah 58: 1-9a; Matt 5:13-20; I Cor. 3:1-9

Let us pray:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your Holy Spirit, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one GOD, now and forever and. Amen.

I was almost going to title this sermon "Getting Committed", as in the description of ham and eggs breakfast: "The chicken is invested but the pig is committed." But, as you will see, that doesn't quite fit.

There are tall steeple churches, like Kirkwood and That Other Chapel. And then there are small steeple churches, like us.

There are Scriptures that comfort. I'm thinking of the 23rd Psalm read at Bob Rowland's Memorial Service. And then there are Scriptures that confront and challenge. That's what we have for today.

Most of the Bible consists of fairly long, often complex stories. The Isaiah reading for today is about half a page from a whole book, actually three books, sixty-six chapters long.

It would be as if I read half a page from a Harry Potter, or a Game of Thrones book, or The Lord of the Rings and asked you to tell me the plot of the whole story. So here's the context for the Isaiah passage.

In 587 BC, Nebuchadnezzar lays siege to Jerusalem. He destroys the Temple and levels the city. He takes the king of Judea, the king's court, and thousands of Judea's people to Babylon in slavery. Fifty years later, Cyrus the Great of Persia conquers Babylon, and declares that the Judeans can go wherever they want. Many of them return home.

But it's not a happy homecoming. There's a drought, crop failures, hunger, inflation, corrupt courts, narcissistic civil and religious leaders, and conflicts between rival political factions. Sound familiar?

So the Judeans accuse GOD of not paying any attention to their religious observances, their fasting. GOD's not making it rain, not giving them abundant crops, riches, justice, peace, and a prosperous city and country. In their minds, it should be a **quid pro quo** proposition, a situation

in which they do something for GOD, in order to receive something else from HIM. If they comply with their obligation to fast, then GOD should return the favor by conferring blessings on them.

Now I don't know what the fasting protocols were in Isaiah's day, but today Jews only have to fast six times a year, so it's not like this group is making tremendous sacrifices.

But still they believe that fasting establishes an duty that GOD is obligated to meet. If that is true, it puts them in a position where they can pull strings and make GOD jump. That would reverse the positions of the creator and the ones who were created.

Obviolusly, their assumptions are wrong on at least two points. First, GOD is GOD, and the people are GOD's creation. GOD has the right as creator to impose obligations on them, but they have no right as the creation to impose obligations on GOD. Second, their fasting is but a tiny part of their religious obligation. Faithfulness in fasting counts for little if they fail to observe the rest of their religious obligations - which, in fact, was what they were doing.

Quid pro quo theology is still around today. We all have known televangelists and, in fact, other ministers, who tell viewers that GOD will bless them financially **IF** they donate to their ministry. Too many people really believe that GOD will honor that promise. And many prayers follow a quid pro quo model: "If you will do this for me, GOD, then I will do this for you." We would do better to pray, "GOD, be merciful to me, a sinner".

The people of Jerusalem have stated their complaint - GOD has ignored their fasting. Now GOD states **HIS** complaint: as an act of repentance or devotion, their fasting is fatally flawed. They have not fasted to honor GOD. Instead, they have fasted for **selfish** reasons. They have assumed that GOD would reward their fasting, so they fasted to earn the reward. Their purpose was not to give devotion to GOD but to gain a blessing from GOD. Their fasting, therefore, was exactly the opposite of genuine fasting. Rather than an act of self-denial, it was a self-centered grasping for reward. Their fasting was not an act of humility but of pride. There is no virtue in that kind of selfishness, and they cannot expect a reward. It's pretty clear from what the Prophet says that God has convicted these people of bad theology.

These people have missed the point, which is GOD's order of compassionate justice: the exercise of justice and the practice of compassion. The Prophet spells these out in his lists of acts that the people of Judea - and we for that matter - **should** be doing.

Now don't mis-understand me when I say this Scripture challenges and confronts us. I am not, repeat NOT, saying that we are like that group of self-righteous, OCD, *quid pro quo*, entitled, Karens and Kevins in Isaiah's Judea.

The challenge of this Isaiah passage for us today is: Are we doing **enough** of the exercise of justice and the practice of compassion? Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the homeless, giving shelter to strangers and immigrants, nursing the sick, visiting the prisoners. In other words, if we were arrested and charged with being Christians, would there be enough evidence to convict us?

The challenge continues in the Gospel reading. This is the middle of the three sections of the Sermon on the Mount. "You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world."

In these two very brief but very powerful **YOU** statements, Jesus is describing the responsibilities that **all** persons have to the world in which they live in their lives. Although there are disciples present there on the Mount, he is not talking to them as disciples - followers who believe that HE is the Messiah, the Son of God. Remember that there are only four men sitting there: Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. And these four are just poor fishermen who Jesus has just called a day or two ago. They can't possibly yet have any idea who Jesus really is.

The YOU is plural, collective, "all of you". Jesus is speaking not only to the four, but also to the whole crowd gathered on the hillside and on the plain down below him. He's not speaking to important, privileged people. He's speaking to ordinary, working class peasants, the poor, and the marginalized. And yet he is saying that they are SALT.

Salt was as valuable as gold. Roman soldiers were often paid with salt instead in coins. Salt was used as a seasoning for food; as a preservative for salting fish or meat; as a disinfectant for wounds; like money as a unit of exchange. Offerings in the Temple, sacrifices of grain or animals, always had to be made with salt.

So Jesus is saying, "You poor, ordinary people are the most valuable things on earth." "Who, us" they reply, "Shirley, you can't be serious!" I am, and don't call me Shirley."

Jesus then makes a pun that unfortunately gets lost in translation. When he says "...but if salt has lost its taste...", the verb he uses can also mean "...to become foolish...". Jesus is saying, "But if you become foolish and forget what you are to be to the world -- its seasoning, forget what

you are to do, then you are no longer good for anything. You should be thrown out and trampled underfoot."

I suspect that here he is making a veiled reference to the Temple priests and scribes with their obsessions about the Law. They are instead paying less attention to what is really important about life: the exercise of justice and the practice of compassion to their fellow human beings.

Salt in and of itself is not worth much. It is only in how salt is used with other things that makes salt valuable, worthwhile, and useful. "You are the salt FOR the earth, for the world, but not for yourselves. You are valuable for what you can contribute to the world around you."

Our distinctive calling as Christians is our responsibility to transform the environment in which we find ourselves. So how are we doing about that? Is there enough evidence of our being salty to convict us of being Christians?

The late Presbyterian seminary professor Douglas RA Hare once said, "*Any church that adapts itself so completely to the secular world around it that its distinctive calling is forgotten, has rendered itself useless. Its vaunted salt has become tasteless and uninteresting.*" And that's what Reinhold Niebuhr meant when he talked about "...being IN the world but not OF it...". We have to remember that we are called to be that which spices up life - our world - and makes it more flavorful.

Jesus continues: "You are the light of the world." It can be difficult for us to identify with the impact and import of this declaration. If we need light, we just hit a wall switch or turn on a table lamp. What could be easier? Our problem is not getting enough light, it's light pollution.

But in Jesus' time, when the sun went down, the only light was from a small bowl of olive oil that could fit in the palm of your hand. The lip of the bowl was crimped in one place. There was a wick of cloth or reed in the crimp, which extended down into the oil.

But how could you light it? Usually the house, which remember was only one room, had a piece of stone with a hole carved in it. Wood shavings, lint, straw, or hair was put in the hole. Then a stick was rapidly rotated in the hole until the heat of the friction lit the tinder. And some of may remember from Boy Scouts just how hard this was to do. Then the wick of the lamp was lit from this small flame. And the process better start before it got too dark to see. Light was very hard to come by and very precious.

Like the first "YOU", this 'you' is also collective. "You are the light FOR all the world, not just for a closed collective." And the word for 'world' is "KOSMOS", the world we know, as different from the world of GOD. So we as a congregation are challenged to be bright lights to the whole of the world around us.

We are called as followers of Jesus to do the works of the exercise of justice and the practice of compassion - to give light to the world and not to let the darkness overcome us. Are our lights bright enough? Only we as a congregation can say.

And if you will permit me the privilege of a personal and closing opinion, I think that numerically we are doing enough. We just have to do more of what we are doing and do it better.

We must not make the mistake of judging our outreach and ministries by the standards of the 1950's. Those were the days when outreach and community ministries brought in families with children. We don't live in that age anymore. We live in an agnostic or maybe even an atheistic age, not a religious one. The guide and standard for our community services must not be church growth and an increased budget. Instead it must be the Gospel commandments of the exercise of justice and the practice of compassion.

Here endeth the challenges for today. Thank goodness.