

Fresh and In the Open
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12); Matthew 5:13-16

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Think of someone giving a talk to an assembly of all workers in a company, then pausing and saying, “And as for your department...” All of a sudden you stop texting and pay attention. It is the kind of attention a teacher receives with the phrase, “And this will be on the test.” In a way, I hear Jesus doing this in his Sermon on the Mount. He begins with “Blessed are the...” Beatitudes, and then in the last says, “Blessed are you...”

Jesus then continues with the direct “you” as he looks at his followers and says, “You are the salt of the earth. ... You are the light of the world.” The “you” is plural. Matthew envisions Jesus speaking this to what was forming as the late first century church. We hear it for the 21st century Presbyterian Church in Sudbury.

We shared a version of our lesson in our prayer of confession. The images are familiar – salt and light – and how to be salty, and not hide your light. Let us hear Jesus tell us what we are in our Gospel lesson in Matthew 3:13-16:

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴*“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your God in heaven.*

Perhaps it is just me, but it seem there is a good deal of finger pointing in both religion and politics. When preachers or politicians of all stripes link the country’s or world’s troubles to the sin of “those people”, I hear them pointing easy fingers of blame. When we, in our own talk, say we know what is wrong and who is to blame, I suspect we may avoid looking in a mirror at our own lives, lifestyles and choices; that way, we don’t risk having the fickle finger of blame pointed back at ourselves. It always seems to be someone else: the progressives or the conservatives, the rich or the poor, the elite or the populist; and of course, the whole of the media, except for the sources that affirm our truths and even our biases. I find finger pointing to be mostly self-serving, even self-preserving, and a means to avoid one’s own responsibility by blaming “them.”

It seems folks in Israel had become great finger pointers, and I am assuming it was the index finger and not its neighbor at the middle of the hand. Isaiah reminds the people they had forgotten God’s call for them to practice honesty, righteousness and justice. Israel had also forgotten the basics of community care for one another. But one thing they had not forgotten – how to fast. They knew when to stop eating, and they knew when it was time and how to break the fast. Oh my, did they fast well, so sure their disciplined fasting was a mark of faithfulness pleasing to God. Indeed, Isaiah notes the people were offended God had not noticed how well they fasted.

In a sense, it would be like our saying we regularly attend church, give away a tenth of our income, work at the food pantry, visit the sick and homebound, and no one seems to notice, no one deposits a credit into our interest-bearing faithfulness account. Yes, we know neither ritual nor service well-done proves faithfulness, but we still hope God notices and credits us.

In fact, God had noticed Israel's fasting ritual, just not in the way they had wanted God to notice. God noticed while the people were diligently keeping their fast, they were also oppressing those who worked for them. *"Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers."*

God then asks four rhetorical questions about fasting beginning with, "Is this the fast I choose...?" and following with a question in which Israel is reminded of the kind of fast, the kind of obedience God chooses. "Rather than put on sackcloth and sit in ashes," God says, "I want you to:

- loose the bonds of injustice,
- undo the thong of the yoke,
- let the oppressed go free,
- share your bread with the hungry,
- bring the homeless poor into your house,
- cloth the naked."

Sounds more than a bit like Jesus at the end of Matthew, when asked, "When did we see you hungry or thirsty or in prison?" and he said, "Inasmuch as you fed and clothed and sheltered the least of these..."

The people of Israel had a choice to make. Would their identity be as finger pointers and excellent fasters; or as a people with humble hearts, feeding the hungry and caring for the vulnerable in their midst.

The promise is obedience to God's fast will open the floodgates of God's mercy, and care; eventually, the temple in ruins will be raised again, the church that is struggling will find new vitality and mission. Isaiah offers a new identity: "You will be called 'repairers of the breach!'"

Similarly, on the disciples, on the church willing to take risks, Jesus offers the Beatitude blessings of inheritance, the fullness of being called a child of God. Such promises might not be known until the next life, the sweet by and by, but the Beatitudes were the promises Jesus announced to God's faithful.

To feel those promises, one need only begin singing many of the African-American spirituals arising out of slavery's oppression. "I've Got Peace Like a River," or "There is a Balm in Gilead," offer strength for today and hope for tomorrow. The words of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," tell of the God sweeping down to take the enslaved to their heavenly home, though it is commonly agreed the song's coded words reference the underground railroad being the sweet chariot that will take the enslaved to a new home, on earth, called freedom.

We are not to live simply for the Beatitudes promises in the life to come, or sing the Spirituals just to get through this earthly life. When we sing, "I'm gonna live so God can use me," it is not about our hope for the then and there, but our commitment to the here and now.

Jesus did not tell his disciples, “You will be the salt of the sweet by and by,”; he said, “You are the salt of the earth.” He did not say, “You are the light of the heavens,” but, “You are the light of the world,” on which your feet walk every day.

Jesus will echo Isaiah’s call to observe the spirit more than the letter of the law. The fast God desires is not that observed by an abstinence from food, but by an abundance of generosity; not by pointing fingers of blame, but by welcoming the homeless into one’s home. Isaiah is calling Israel to be Israel – to remember and reclaim its identity as purveyors of God’s compassion, rather than obeyers of temple ritual. The prophet announces God’s promise that if the people “stop pointing the finger,” then their light will shine in the darkness, break forth like the dawn.

Jesus blows apart the normal boundaries of community, extending the disciples’ world past borders of nation or culture. Their identity was no longer as a trampled nation of Israel, but as the salt of the entire earth, the light of the whole world and this was not just lofty talk, for they were to be light up against an empire that also declared itself to be the light of the world.

Salt in ancient times was a seasoning and a fertilizer, a purifier and a sign of loyalty, a cleanser and a preserver of foods. [Choi, Jin Young, in Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Volume 1, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2013), p. 81.]

Being salt is Jesus saying to us, “You can make a difference.” Yet, he warns salt can become stale, lose its flavor and usefulness. One writer suggests, freshness is lost whenever disciples forget their call “to disorder the status quo, by valuing those who are dispossessed, caring for those who suffer loss,” and treating workers fairly. [Riggs, Marcia, in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010), p.332.]

Light shines best in the open. Salt is useful only when the salt is fresh, which disciplines of prayer and fasting, study and service can do. The musical “Godspell” put it in song this way,

*You are the light of the world!
But if that light is under a bushel,
Brrr, it's lost something kind of crucial
You got to stay bright to be the light of the world
You are the salt of the earth
But if that salt has lost its flavor
It ain't got much in its favor
You can't have that fault and be the salt of the earth!*

When people taste and see the church, they are to taste and see God in Christ. As a congregation, we can sprinkle the flavor of Christ’s love within and without our community. We can be a beacon of light to our neighborhood, but that light is not a little votive candle providing soft light to a few with whom we have chosen to gather. No, this light has to shine in the wide open. Sometimes that means taking the light off the lampstand, out of the house, and into the streets; sometimes those in the city on the hill are called to leave the security of life on precipice and risk walking down the hill into dark valleys.

You are the salt...of the earth... You are the light...of the world. The “you” is plural – it is not just up to a pastor, or a few key individuals, or the session – this is more like a Southern “y’all.”

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. That is our Christ-given identity, giving us confidence we can change the flavor of the bland and increase the brightness of the drab. So, let us fill our salt shakers and let us start shaking them – for Christ's sake.