

## *Being Salty Salt and Bright Light*

Isaiah 58: 1-10

Matthew 5: 13-20

Last week, we went so far and then I stopped. Today I want to pick up where I left off because the lectionary brings us two more scriptures that follow the same kind of theme, particularly the prophetic passage.

“But Bruce,” you ask, “what did you preach about last Sunday?” I thought you’d ask that, so let me recap.

We had Micah 6 last week, you know, that well-known passage that says: *What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.* You may recall that this is the answer to a question, really a complaining response by God’s people who can’t imagine why God does not favor their worship. In short, the context of the question is: What does God want in worship that will please God? The response is *To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.*

The problem is that such an explanation isn’t what we’d call worship at all. Certainly the people hearing the prophet Micah’s words would have felt the same way; that isn’t worship.

About two hundred years later, after the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed and God’s people had returned from the Babylonian exile, Third Isaiah turns to the worship and devotional life of God’s people. The prophet gives God’s word in a tone that has a mocking quality that echoes what God has heard from God’s people: *Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?* Again, we have God showing utter contempt for the worship and devotional life of God’s people.

Like we asked last week, together with God’s people in Micah’s time: Well, what does God want in worship? Third Isaiah spells it out for them:

*Is not this the kind of fast that I’ve chosen: to loose the chains of injustice, to undo the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and provide the homeless poor with shelter; when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own brothers and sisters? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear....*

Wait a minute! This is just like Micah. It’s an answer about worship that isn’t worship. Micah says: *Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.* Third Isaiah has all this stuff about loosing the chains of injustice, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, and welcoming the outcast. What part of that sounds even remotely like worship?

These things aren’t alien to us, of course. We recognize that stuff as mission stuff. I mean, we *like* mission stuff and all, but it surely isn’t **worship**. This is confusing.

We need to answer this fundamental question about worship. This is at the heart of what we do in churches all across the world. We worship. We come to church on Sunday if nothing else. We measure ourselves on worship measures. How many butts are in the pews, and how much money did we collect? That's how we measure whether we're successful or not.

We set aside this space in all of our churches that is called a sanctuary where we worship. Chances are that nothing else much happens in that space all week long except during that hour or two on Sunday mornings. It's our sacred space. It's where God comes and meets us each week. We take great pride in our worship space and lovingly adorn it. It has made us a religion that is worship- or ritual-centered and sanctuary-focused.

Yet we don't find his orientation endorsed, required, or valued in scripture. We came up with this on our own along the way, and Emperor Constantine's 4<sup>th</sup> century conversion probably was the biggest factor, but that's a long rabbit chase. You can call it tradition, call it what you like. The bottom line is that our understanding and practice of "Christianity" doesn't have much scriptural support at all. In fact, in the passages from the prophets, we should sense God's *hostility* to it.

God wants servants to advance the Kingdom among the people for whom God has the greatest care and concern; the weak, the poor, the vulnerable, the outcast. That's what the prophets are saying, and what Jesus and the gospels are saying. It doesn't say to go to church on Sunday.

There is a consequence to having worship-centered, building-focused Christian faith. We actually practice a belief that God is separated from the world, found in a special sanctuary place where we must go. It is our priority activity. We practice a belief that God wants us in the sanctuary and doing what we call worship – preaching, singing, praying, and putting money in the collection plate. That's what we do, and we've done it for millennia. After we've done all that and everything that goes with that – paying for a professional pastor and talented staff and the buildings and the property and all the rest, then we use the leftover for that mission stuff that God is so interested in.

Have we got that backward?

God and Jesus call us out there in the world, not in here to a sanctuary. Most of the people of God's primary concern aren't in sanctuaries on the Sabbath. They're out there, struggling. They tend to stay away from churches unless they need something, and once they get whatever they want, they're gone. If people doing worship here aren't God's priority people, people in deep need, but instead are all comfortable, secure, acceptable people, then something is really screwy. It's upside down or inside out. The script got flipped.

Remember how we talked about flipping the script last week. Last week's Beatitudes from Jesus are famous for flipping the script. Jesus names all these folks who

might be called “losers” in short and turns them into *winners* in God’s eyes. If we take the Beatitudes seriously, they seem nutty. When did the poor ever come to think of themselves as blessed? It’s the rich folks who are blessed. Duh! How do those who mourn figure themselves as blessed? Or the meek? Or any of the others? Particularly those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. They aren’t blessed; they’re screwed.

What each of the Beatitudes shows is how God flips the script on how the world esteems those who act faithfully – those who do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God, or those who loose the chains of injustice, feed the poor hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, and embrace the outcast.

So with all this script flipping, whose script should we follow? Well, that seems obvious. God’s, right? Then we may have things all wrong with how we do church. That’s sobering, and confounding.

If we think about it, maybe that explains why the church is always coming up short in people’s estimation; why we’re always hearing from people how they love Jesus and loathe the church. The discrepancies are painfully clear.

Our ritual-centered, building-focused worship is also a creature of culture and oriented to consumers, requiring it to be attractive and popular. That’s deadly for the gospel’s challenging word. Churches are institutional, acculturated, consumerist, and corporatized. That’s nothing Jesus wants, nothing God wants.

In our striving to be appealing to consumers, we avoid conflict and controversy. Pastors fear talking about hot issues that directly concern God’s people in need because people are going to get ticked off. They want their church to be separate from the world, or at least to endorse their chosen values, however sinfully unbiblical their values may be. We lose the gospel voice that rings out against injustice, that demands peace, that strives for healing, that welcomes the alien and the stranger like family, and all the rest because people may not like it. Of course, some people never liked what Jesus said. That’s how he got executed by the government. He was meddlin’.

Let’s take a look at that passage from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. It continues where the Beatitudes left off last week. This is familiar, too – salt, but loss of saltiness; light, but hid under a bushel. Each has Jesus declaring that faithful followers bear a sacred identity and play a powerful role. But it also suggests that the identity can be voided, and the powerful gift can be squandered. Our claims to be faithful servants can be hollow and empty. So, the salt that’s lost its saltiness is good for nothing, and the lamp that gets hidden fails and loses its inherent promise.

We’ve heard what salt and light for the Kingdom of God are all about in the Beatitudes, and clearly it’s powerful stuff. Jesus’ warning is for those who fail to follow the script, the crazy tough script that we find in the Beatitudes (and elsewhere). Those who follow their own script rather than Jesus’s script will be useless like un-salty salt, and like a covered flame that hoards and voids its promise of light.

He has one more section of teaching in today's reading. It concerns the notion that Jesus is doing something so new and different that he's scandalously casting aside the law and the prophets, voiding the sacred commands of the Hebrew scriptures. He denies this and insists that he has come not as an end to sacred command and prophecy, but for its fulfillment. The way Jesus talks, it would be *easier* to toss all of that aside and do whatever *he* wants, but he serves the higher righteousness of his Father in heaven. Jesus not only preserves God's word but makes it alive and powerful once again.

He warns his followers once again. This time he offers a cautionary teaching to have a level of righteousness that exceeds the scribes and Pharisees, the religious elite. Notice that he doesn't say that they should strive to be *like* them, or to be *as* righteous as they are. Jesus sets the bar higher than *their* highest expectation. Is it a recipe for failure? I doubt that. It's an emphatic expression not to be like the religious elite, not to be ritual-based and building-focused. And that happens to be exactly what Jesus' church turned into, again, not what God or Jesus wanted.

We're given some strong counsel by Jesus. We stand convicted of having dedicated our resources to things that cause our salt to lose its saltiness, and have us hiding our light under a bushel. We spend our time and our money keeping up a paid professional pastor, maintaining our buildings and our property, and whatever we have left over might be aimed toward mission, those very things that the prophets and Jesus said was what our primary purpose in faithful life should be. We've got it backwards. When they flipped the script on us, they were telling us how we had it all wrong.

Of course, we can't simply undo where we are and become something that we aren't. I told that to Presbytery yesterday. But as the Presbytery looks to the future, I encouraged them to get the script right. Make the focus on building missional communities of faithful witness, communities that work with and include the people of deep need, the people of God's priority concern.

I'm not sure what that looks like for us. As we dwindle in numbers and in capability, we may want to consider what our future, and maybe better, what our legacy holds. Can we yet plant the seeds of faithful service to the Kingdom of God rather than catering to the worldly consumers of religious stuff as we have always done?

I tried to outline what I thought missional communities look like when I spoke at Presbytery yesterday. The ideas are still new and fuzzy, but that's natural since what I'm considering is a model of faithful servant communities that is virtually **opposite** of what we think of as "church." Perhaps I'll pick it up next week, or maybe it will need longer to ripen and mature.

One thing is certain, God wants our efforts focused on building a fire out there, not on tending the flickering candle flames hidden under the bushel of our sanctuary.