

Sunday, February 9, 2020

Deacon Bonnie LeValley

You Are, PERIOD.

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

For a lifelong United Methodist, struggling to figure out who this church is in the midst of this season of discontent and who I am bearing the name United Methodist, this opening declaration from Jesus is sweet and simple. Sometimes the simple works really well for me. You are the light of the world. Jesus proclaims because of what God has already done, you are the salt of the earth. It's "you are" not "You should be" or "You may become" or even "you must." You are, period. That's God's grace. The trouble of course with the fullness of God's grace is in the details

It's easy to find a Christian who can recite the phrase "We are justified by grace"; it's more difficult to find one who lives out a deep understanding of what that looks like. For too many of us much of the time, being a Christian is about morality and sustaining a boundary that sets us apart. The Pharisees were trying to be stars shining out the darkness of the world and Isaiah makes short work of the wisdom of this notion. We don't need more stars in our life journey, we need regular lights we can see by. One light opening up the darkness for another.

Isaiah cries out against the confusion of true and false worship, condemning God's people for honoring the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit. Through the prophet, God calls them to abandon their hollow obedience to the law. and come to know God by fulfilling the intent of the law through just and compassionate care for the neighbor. Rev. Gil Lewis did a wonderful job of remembering those light bearers just 2 weeks ago in her message. Yet, even to this day we are slow learners, stubborn to resist change. Isaiah charges the people of God to observe the desirable fast in outreach to the needs of the people, which involves not only feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for one's own, but addressing the attitudes and structures responsible for the injustices. "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" We can no longer pretend that some people do not exist or that someone else will care for them. Assistance is not to be withheld. Carol Dempsey in commenting on this passage says, "True fasting involves dealing with those conditions, situations, and people that are ethically corrupting and corrupted, for the sake of the oppressed individual, God's children and the common good. God does not reject the practice of fasting, but insists that the practice be transformative for the community.

Lent is fast approaching, less than 3 weeks away. Fasting is one discipline that calls us to make 'right' our relationship with God. In both Isaiah and Matthew we have been given a new instruction on fasting that has as its end in a 'right relationship.' As we seek God in acts of justice and mercy, God responds to the needs of another and God respond to the one who seeks. Isaiah instructs that when we live out a life of love in accordance with the Torah, God will answer when we call.

Last week, Pastor Beckie shared with us some of the teachings from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus embraces and renews Isaiah's prophetic message. Having just proclaimed the Beatitudes, the upside-down values of God's reign, Jesus explains how these values are given flesh in the lives of believers. Just as God blesses the poor in spirit because God chooses to do so (and not because people have rushed to spiritual poverty to earn that blessing), so God simply chooses to create and commission salt and light for the earth. By grace, God chooses us, chooses you. You ARE, period!

You are the light, Yikes! It's more difficult for us to actually be salt and light than it was for us to become salt and light. Being salt and light involves giving ourselves away. Salt disappears into food to make food tastier. Jesus' disciples transform the world by disappearing in humble service. Life in a salted world is savory. Likewise, light that is not bound by obstructions goes on for miles, like ripples of self-giving service.

The difficulty is that we humans, even faithful ones, are hesitant to give ourselves away to dissolve or dissipate quietly. We tend to cluster with like-minded people so that we can compliment one another on our saltiness and brightness without the effort of salting or lighting anything.

Brian Maas shares, "Here in the United States at least, we who call ourselves Christian have for some time tended to cluster our salt and concentrate our light to the exclusion of others and to the benefit of none. Trading humility for hubris, we have salted our culture well-nigh to death with notions utterly foreign to the Sermon on the Mount. We speak of Christian values, Christian policies, Christian candidates, and even Christian dating sites. We lament being persecuted, overlooked, insulted and mocked Christians. Called simply to bear the savor of our Savior, we bear instead the bitterness of our better-ness."

In the same way, we too often hide our light—or at least contain its glow—under a bushel basket, fearful that letting it shine farther might make it less bright in our immediate vicinity. It is as though there are corners of God's world unworthy of the illumination they would know if we let our light be placed on a lamp stand rather than under the security of a basket. We should not be surprised that many would rather stand with others in the darkness than be cursed by light that shines only on some.

God called Israel to be a light to the nations, we too are to be such a light so that all people can be blessed. The light of a struggling congregation even if it is small and can still illumine the world.

In practical ways, how have we let God's light shine? By doing good works? You know... those acts of covenantal love, mercy and justice? We are the light of the world that will not be hid; we are the salt of the earth that seasons everything it touches. Perhaps we do this together as we work against oppression and hunger and poverty. Perhaps we do this together as we care, selflessly, for those who are our own kin. And perhaps, as we do this together, we too can become a light that reflects the presence of Christ in our world, and the desire of God to heal and bless all those who are in need. It is God, of course, who weaves us together, and forms us into a beautiful light for the world to know God's grace.

Even, as I worked on putting this sermon to paper there were a myriad of interruptions regarding the concern for others who were in need of medical care and a presence to help pass the time and share the burden of the struggle; The word of God through the hands and hearts of the people of God - The struggles of the day needing light for those in need. Through many text messages the light arrived at the corners where it was needed. Thanks be to God!

This week we celebrate Valentine's Day. A day when we celebrate love! What better time to take to heart and share your God given light with others or to remind others how they have been light to our lives. I would suggest that you take a moment this week and use this card to be the light for another. Share with them how they have been God's light for you! What a gift!

We are disciples of Jesus when we allow our character to be formed by God's blessings! As the light of the world, we are followers of Jesus who accept the covenantal blessings as a call into relationships with those on the fringes. We come to this world as Salt and light not to abolish the law but to fulfill it because we are called to be like Jesus. You are salt. You are light. Period; no, if, ands or buts about it! Let your flavor and light be known so that others will give glory to our God in heaven! Amen.

When I was a kid, one of my chores was to bring in the mail from the mailbox. It was a nice chore, not too hard and a good excuse to get outside and see what was going on. But...none of the mail was ever for me! Yes, there were some catalogs I could look at, but my mom got lots of letters; and I got none. One day I pouted, "*I don't EVER get any letters!*" My mom very casually replied, "*You have to write letters to get letters.*" I decided that I really wanted to receive letters and since I wanted letters, maybe other people did, too. And if I wrote to other people, maybe they would write back to me...and then we'd both get something we liked! Sure enough, I wrote to my grandmother and to my cousin and to a friend who had moved away...and they each wrote me back! So I wrote them back. And I also started writing to others; some never wrote back but told me they loved receiving a letter from me; a few joined my list of pen-pals. For awhile I had 6 different people I was regularly sending and receiving letters with! *To get what I wanted...I just had to give it to someone else!*

In our Bible story today from Isaiah, the people of God are whining. They are complaining to God that here they are going to church and all of that, but they are not getting anything for themselves. Oops. I think I can kind of hear God sigh and then chuckle. God tells the people that if they want something for themselves, they must give it to someone else. *'If you take care of others, your light will rise in the darkness and your gloom will be gone!'* To get what they wanted...they just had to give it to someone else who also needed it. Sounds a lot like, *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

REPORT THIS AD

This coming week we celebrate Valentine's Day. It is always fun to receive Valentines but...I wonder if you see the connection today. To get Valentines, we might need to give them. While we may not receive as many as we give, we will be filled with warm happies knowing that we have made others feel warm and happy. To help you get started, I have a Valentine for each of you. But this is not me giving a Valentine to you...though you are each a special Valentine to me...this Valentine is so you will have one to give to someone else.

*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* I wonder if this works with things other than letters or Valentines?

Will you pray with me? **(This is an echo prayer: the leader says a line and the children repeat it.)**

Dear Lord,  
Thank You  
for loving me.  
Help me  
to share with others  
that I may then  
receive from others.  
Amen

Today Jesus speaks to us of light. Only this is not the light that shines from the sky. No, this is not even the light I seem to increasingly need to decipher a recipe or to read a novel. No, this is the light that comes from within — the kind that shines through individual people and whole communities of people for as he says here in Matthew,

“You are the light of the world.”

Only that is where the difference ends, it seems to me.

- For both kinds of light can bring clarity and understanding.
- Both can and do illuminate the way.
- Both are vitally important to life itself.
- And neither one can (or should) be hid — just like that city on a hill. Indeed, the light that comes from within is never, ever meant for me and mine, for ourselves alone. While the light of Christ can't help but warm us, too, it is always meant for the 'other.' It is always meant for the world. Only it seems obvious to me, this:

One cannot 'be light' or 'bear light' for others unless we have experienced and/or received this gift of 'light.' If my world is shrouded in darkness, it is awfully hard to 'let my light shine...' as Jesus' words today would have us do. And yet, somehow, even if the 'light' I am given to shine seems so small — it surely goes a long way. Indeed, I have heard it said that if the earth were entirely flat, you could see the light of a flickering candle thirty miles away. So it doesn't take much light for it to be seen.

I do not know when the sun will shine again here in Northern Illinois or upon us here in this country where darkness surely threatens. But I do know this. The Light still shines.. even when it seems as though it doesn't. And when it seems that it doesn't, well, then I expect it starts with you and me. And maybe we simply start by looking for 'light:'

- Light that is gift.
- Light that can be received.
- Light that can be passed along.

Here is where I have found myself thinking about this kind of light in these past days:

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And it comes with a promise: “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...”  
3 It would be very easy to square off in corners and say this is what my group believes, and this is why the group who disagrees with me is completely wrong. But how different would it be to sit down together and explore where there are instances of injustice today? Who is experiencing oppression? Who is hungry? What might be done to help people who are without a home? It's well below freezing outside right now; who doesn't have warm clothes? And who, among my family and close friends, are in need of care? What's more, how different would it be to explore together which solutions are or aren't working, and which solutions may or may not work better? Actually, with a nod to David Brooks, that sounds a bit like an adventure to me. One that would be worth taking. One that could honor these words from Isaiah. One that might help us to engage with the world in a way that reflects Christ to others. This coming Sunday we'll read from St. Matthew about when Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world that will not be hid; that

we are the salt of the earth that seasons everything it touches. Perhaps we do this together as we work against justice and oppression and hunger and poverty. Perhaps we do this together as we care, selflessly, for those who are our own kin. And perhaps, as we do this together, we too can become a light that reflects the presence of Christ in our world, and the desire of God to heal and bless all those who are in need. It is God, of course, who weaves us together, and forms us into a beautiful tapestry. After worship we'll make our way to the Fellowship Hall for some faithful, honest, respectful conversation. Come join us, and let's see together what God can accomplish. David J. Risendal, Pastor