

5 Epiphany
Christ and Grace
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Isaiah 58:1-12
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Matthew 5:13-20

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isaiah 58:6-7)

God was speaking these words through the prophet to the exiled people of Israel, but God also speaks to us today in the words of Isaiah, and we might find the message challenging. I wanted to talk about salt today because I am a former chemist and I know some stuff about sodium chloride! But I kept being pulled back to the prophet’s words... which are timeless. That’s the thing about prophets.... They speak to universal truths that hold throughout time; they reveal to us our sometimes imperfect human nature.

It would appear that the same sorts of controversy that plagued Israel and the prophets are still alive and well today. While we’re not a people in exile, we are definitely in bondage to sin and culture and power and wealth and a host of other things. There are many consequences to bondage, and perhaps the main one is that when you are in bondage you can no longer live life as intended, you can no longer connect with the community. There is a loss that is experienced when we are in any kind of bondage.

The church at large is only one aspect of our lives that is affected by the loss experienced from our bondage. As all churches look at decreased attendance and dwindling resources, we wonder why what we’ve always done is no longer working. We try to maintain our buildings and keep the doors open for our members. We are welcoming and we’ve kept busy offering services and programs. We have done good work. So, God, why is our “fast” not acceptable? Why are our programs and projects and congregations floundering in this 21st century? Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors, but where are the people?

Now, we might assume that the problem is society’s bondage to culture or any number of things; that the problem is “out there”, that the unchurched are following false gods. And that assumption might be partly true for some; and even for us at different times in our lives. But I wonder if the decline in numbers of those participating in churches has more to do with not claiming our baptismal vows and following Jesus out in the world, or not being able to hear the prophetic voice of God today in all the noise of our culture?

Dwight Zscheile, Episcopal priest and author who serves on the special taskforce for reimagining the Episcopal Church, writes that there are some long held establishment assumptions that our church buildings and the clergy are the focus of God’s presence and activity, but the reality is that the future of the Church lies *outside* of our doors. I would add that the future of the church also lies within every member. And maybe the church as institution has become an idol for us.

Perhaps it might be helpful to look at how God *answered* the chosen people of Israel in the time of Isaiah. They had been complaining and lamenting for quite a while. Their beloved Jerusalem

was in ruins, and they did not understand why God was not responding to their pleas for justice, and for a return to their former comfortable way of life.

God's answer was not an easy one to swallow. God did *not* tell them to rebuild the temple and then go back in and sit down, where God would be waiting to spend some peaceful quality time with them. No. What God told them was to stop throwing a pity party and get on with *doing* justice, *loving* neighbors, and *acting* like members of God's family should act. And here's where the prophet's message gets challenging.

This answer ought to convict us today because we all fall short of the mark. We are too quick to serve our own interests, as the prophet says, to quarrel and fight; we are too hasty to point fingers and speak evil, and we lament that someone else should do something about this situation or that someone else is to blame. What if we took the words of Isaiah to heart in our own context? Suppose we agree to quit lamenting about the reality that neither the church nor the world are the way they used to be and what if we could admit that the "good 'ol days" were not without their own set of issues and problems.

Instead, what if we determined to let the Spirit guide us to really be about the counter-cultural business of addressing injustice, of working to free the oppressed, of solving hunger in our communities, and most of all to share the love of God everywhere? Is it possible that this is, indeed, the fast that God desires of us? More importantly, do we believe and trust that God will guide us and meet our needs if we follow the divine imperative that Isaiah shouts out here? Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors, and where are the people? They are outside of our doors!

If we really want to spread the love of God and the good news of Jesus Christ, then we must decide to remove our own yoke and step out in faith. We may have to take some baby steps, and we will sometimes fail. But lamenting about how much better the past was is not an effective way to witness to the presence of God at work in the world right now. We are called to be repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets to live in. Could God be calling us to this task right here in Petersburg?

In our gospel reading today, Jesus offers an alternative to lament. Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." He did not say, "Try to be salt," or, "You should be salt," he said, "You are salt."

In Jesus' day salt was a rare and valuable commodity. Jesus used salt in his analogy to let his followers know that he expected something *extraordinary* from them; that he placed a high value on them and on what he required of them. He taught his followers to act for God in ways that were as important as salt was in their world. For example, salt was often connected with purity and was used by the Jews to purify their offerings to God. Salt was used as a preservative to prevent food from spoiling. It was often used as currency and payment for goods and services – this is where we get the word "salary".

Today salt may not seem as important or as valuable to us. It comes in forty-pound bags to soften water or melt ice. It is used as a thickener in liquid soap and is used in all sorts of household

cleaners. It still preserves food (think of bacon and country ham!). Salt also makes us thirsty and it's part of the delicate balance of our biological system; it's essential for life.

To say that someone is the salt of the earth is a compliment. As Christians, if we are to be the salt of the earth, if we are to answer Jesus' imperative to be salt, then we must make an effort to be nurturing agents for those around us, softening the hardships they encounter. We can be salt in ways that melt the iciness of life as we apply the warmth of the love of God to our relationships with one another. We can become preservatives of God's goodness, creating a thirst for God in this world.

But salt does not work alone. For salt to work it must be used with something, mixed with something. Salt that remains in the saltshaker can do nothing. Jesus was really saying the same thing as the prophet Isaiah. Don't stay in the shaker lamenting, being salt just for the sake of being salt. Get out of the shaker to mix with the world, to repair the breach, to make a difference, to spread God's good seasoning to everyone.

Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and go out to serve the people!

Amen.