

5 Epiphany, Year "A" [RCL]: Isaiah 58:1-9a [9b-12]; Psalm 112:1-9 [10]; 1 Corinthians 3:1-121 [13-16];
Matthew 5:13-20

Title: By him, with him, and in him

Last week I noted that the Sermon on the Mount has Jesus saying a lot about who God calls us to be while saying virtually nothing about what we might be called to believe. That theme continues this morning beginning with some stern and uncompromised words from the prophet Isaiah which exclaim that God is not much impressed by words but does have some rather high expectations having to do with who we are to be and how we are to live. Through the pen of the prophet, God says we are to live a righteous life, we are to seek and promote justice, and we are to be compellingly compassionate toward the less fortunate.

I share with you this morning that I find this passage from Isaiah to be among the most profound and powerful in all of Holy Scripture. I absolutely remember the first time I ever read it. I was in the middle of a year-long Bible study when one morning there it was – this reading from Isaiah: Is THIS the fast that I choose says God through his prophet? Do you think I'm impressed that you go through the motions of the religious life? Do you think I'm impressed, says God, that you LOOK religious. Do you think that I'm impressed that you fast, yet at the same time you oppress your workers? No, says God. If you speak religious words and engage in religious acts of discipline while the way you live your life shines no light, I despise your religious talk and I take no satisfaction from your religious rituals.

God is being so clear here as God speaks through his prophet. The message is unambiguous. When you oppress the poor while going around talking about how much you love God and God's ways -- while at the same time you oppress the poor, God is simply not amused. When the rich and the powerful develop imperial economic systems that systematically make the rich more rich and the powerful more powerful – and do so at the expense of and on the backs of the poor, God is not pleased.

No -- when those who oppress the poor are the same as those who love the smell of incense on Sunday morning... God says your incense are not pleasing to me.

There is probably no greater demonstration of what this looks like in our day and time than that billionaires routinely pay no taxes whatsoever, not a dime mind you, while the poor have their wages garnished to feed the imperial coffers.

When ones mansion overlooks shanty town and that mansion was obtained by clever manipulation of the engines of enterprise and tax structures that grease the skids on behalf of the rich while at the same time pretty much *are ensuring that the poor have no reasonable chance to rise above their misery and poverty...* and yet the speech of the one living in the mansion is sprinkled with phrases like “Jesus is Lord; Jesus this and Jesus that,” God is not amused. When such words fall ever so easily and repetitively from the *tongue* while the *hand* is busy stealing from the poor such words lie lifeless and fallow. Such words become part of the seeds that were spread in good earth but take not root for they were planted much too shallow.

When one proclaims the saving nature of Jesus’ life and work yet that one’s own life saves no one, God is not amused.

Our text this morning has God saying, you go through the motions, you come to church but you no sooner get out into the world than you are quarrelling with one another, defending your self-interest and doing so in ways that look not very much like the light I have called you to be in the world. Do you imagine such things are acceptable to the Lord, says the prophet? I tell you, says the prophet, such hypocrisy render’s your voice inaudible in heaven. Now that’s harsh, but that is taken right from our text this morning.¹

Well, I sat on my couch all those years ago immersed in Bible study discovering that all of this is in my Bible and I got to tell you, I got excited. And I said - I think I maybe even said it out loud -- YES! Now we’re getting somewhere. Now we’re talking about the difference between being ‘religious’ only in the sense of talking religious talk and participating in religious rituals verses living into the life God has called us to – to be compassionate towards and to be companions to one another.

This is God saying to the nation of Israel that you put way too much stock in the fact that you were born into the People of God, sons and daughters of Abraham. God could turn stones into sons and daughters of Abraham.²

¹ Isaiah 58:4. Matthew 5: 20

² Matthew 3:7b

And this is God saying, “Just because you were born into a Christian family does not make you a Christian any more than being born into a military family makes you a fighter pilot.”

But God’s prophet does not leave it at that. He gives us the courtesy of the ‘therefore’; gives us some examples of what it means, what it looks like when we are behaving like the children of God. And so he says, among other things, loose the bonds of injustice. Share what you have with the hungry. House the poor. Clothe the naked. Be an agent of healing – attend to the needs of the afflicted. Do these things, he says, and your light shall break forth like the dawn and you, yourself will be healed.

Do these things and you will be like a watered garden – you will be nourished and you will grow in the direction of the fullness of the person I created you to be and your light shall break forth like the dawn – thus says Isaiah in a moment of poetic clarity.

These are the words of God’s prophet. But, of course, Jesus will have the last word. Jesus will say: indeed it is true all that the prophets have said. Jesus will say that to merely look religious is to not even be in the game. The scribes and the Pharisees were famous, or maybe infamous, for their show of religiosity – that is to say, for example, their stern and unhappy faces when they were fasting and the wearing of religious clothing and prayer beads befitting their place of prominence in the community.

The scribes and the Pharisees, the religious leaders of their day, were also known for insisting that it is in the keeping of the law, and keeping the law in the most minutest of detail, is that which is most pleasing to God.

But Jesus is having none of it. What does Jesus say of the law? Jesus will say: I have not come to abolish the law or the words of the prophets but rather to fulfill the law. Indeed, not a dot or a tittle, not one letter or even one stroke of a letter of the law is to be set aside. But these things – the rituals, the disciplines – though important to the spiritual life -- are by no means the whole of the spiritual life or righteous living. “I tell you,” says Jesus, “until your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Dear ones, Jesus is saying, these things of which the scribes and Pharisees are so proud of and are so busy pointing to are but the beginning. Jesus will say, in effect, you have not even began the journey in earnest until you have written these things on your hearts – until your ways are guided by the mind and will of God which you have come to

know as intimately as you know anything. Come to that place in your spiritual journey and you will be on your way – and you will be on your way to something like salvation.

Come to that place in your spiritual journey and you will clothe the naked, and house the homeless; feed the hungry and attend to the needs of the afflicted - not because someone told you it is the thing to do; not because it is written in God's law book, but rather because you have come to that place where your will and mind are informed by God's will, God's mind, and God's nature – and that is a mind, a will, and a nature that **yearns** to be compassionate. That is, as we say in our baptismal vows, to respect the dignity of every human being. And that is to seek and serve Christ in all persons – also from our baptismal vows. And it is proclaiming by both word and deed the Good News of God in Christ. Not because these things are in the rulebook as the scribes and Pharisees seemed to think, but rather because by the grace of God these things have become our nature.

Dear ones the older I get, the more I experience, the more I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is not politics or politicians who will and can save the world. It is not armies. Politics and political parties are a human invention; and an invention that, if we are not careful, can divert our attention from the things that matter. Things that Jesus spoke of and the things that God calls us to.

This is what I think of when I hear the phrase Jesus Saves. Yes Jesus saves by way of his life and work but at the same time the saving help of Jesus comes about through us. At least part of what it must mean to be saved is that by the grace of God Jesus can save us from ourselves -- if we but let him. Jesus' saving help is released and magnified as we devote ourselves to that which he loves and to who he calls us to be: By him, and with him, and in him as the words of Holy Eucharist have it.

And so, we wind up where we always wind up. With Jesus responding to the question, 'What is really important; what is the most important thing to keep in mind and to live into. And Jesus says it is to love God and the ways of God, and it is to love your neighbor'.

All the rest is but commentary.

Amen