

Isaiah 58:6-12 ~ Matthew 5:13-20

This is Our Religion

February 9, 2020 ~ 5th Sunday after Epiphany

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture:

What you can't see without looking at our second scripture in context, and what is rarely noted, is how today's passage connects to what comes right before Jesus' "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world," declarative statements. These words occur right after the Beatitudes, where Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven..." There are seven Beatitudes that follow this pattern, but then there is a shift. Something we noticed at our Bible Study on Wednesday night. Jesus shifts the last beatitude, the eighth one from, "Blessed are **those**...for **they** will...." to "blessed are **you**—for **your** reward." His language turns more direct personal. He says, "Blessed are **you** when people revile and persecute **you** and utter all kinds of evil against **you** falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for **your** reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before **you**." (5:11-12) And the next sentence is where we will start: **You** are the salt of the earth... So, if **you** are feeling persecuted and misunderstood right now, if the light within and around you seems dim, dark or gone—this scripture you are about to hear is especially for you!

Sermon:

It was 1964, I was standing on the marble chancel of First Presbyterian Church in Englewood, New Jersey. My feet were feeling pinched but fancy in their black patent leather, shoes that buckled at the ankle, my hands were sheathed in soft white gloves, and my "sticky-outy" slip under my dress made standing up definitely the preferable option. This was the moment when I received my first "real" Bible, in third grade. The tradition there, was to place on the inside cover of each child's Bible a special verse that was picked out just for them. Pasted on the inside of my Bible, was the one we just heard in the middle of today's gospel text: Matthew 5:16," Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

This verse and this text have grown with me over the years. Perhaps this is a core text for some of you, too. In the past two weeks, I have had the honor of leading funeral services for two people. One of the questions I often ask the family when we meet and share memories and of their recently departed loved one, is if that person had a core text they know of. A text or truth, either stated or implied that was central to how they lived and navigated their life. Some tattoo their truth in symbol or word on their bodies. So, we talk about their tattoos (either inked on their skin, or simply deep in their heart) as insight into their spirits.

Since today is the day of our Annual Meeting, it's a good day to consider this question as a church body. I'm not suggesting that we all decide on a FPC tattoo and go get inked. But these lectionary scripture texts just happen to express our FPC anchor point, here on Annual Meeting Day. A good day for a quick reset of who Christ thinks we are and what Christ call us to do. A good day to remember what really is our religion.

Doug Hammack, in his book *Rethinking our Story: Can We Still Be Christian in the Quantum Era?* spells it out beautifully with this story about a conversation he had with his son Daniel one summer day, he writes, *When my children were younger, I “ruined their summers by insisting that they read a significant book each year. One book I had them read was a collection of stories about young people setting right what is wrong in the world, fighting injustice, resisting poverty, and working against child labor and human trafficking.*

When they were finished, I asked each child to my office to talk it over. “Why do you think I had you read that book this summer?” I asked. They stumbled trying to get the right answer so they could get on with their summers. I particularly remember my son Daniel answering with a series of canned Sunday school responses. To each of his responses, I’d reply, “Nope, that not why I had you read the book.” Finally, semi-joking he pulled out all his best church answers. “I don’t know exactly what you’re looking for here, but I’m pretty sure the answer has to be either, ‘God loves me,’ ‘Jesus saves me,’ ‘the Bible tells me,’ or ‘we should pray about it.’

I laughed and let him off the hook. “Daniel, I wanted you to read this book about people serving the earth, healing what is wounded, and fixing what is broken because this is your religion. If you’re a follower of Jesus, this is your religion.

“Jesus’ message had very little to do with what happens after we die.” I continued. “This book was about the real heartbeat of Jesus’ teachings. People healing the earth. People caring for others. When Jesus used the term, ‘The kingdom of God,’ he was talking about the stuff people are doing in this book. ‘Be salt, spread across the earth to bring out the God flavors. Be light, spread across the earth to show forth God’s colors. Heal what is wounded. Restore what is lost. Challenge what is evil. Enlighten what is blinded. Repair what is broken.

“This Daniel... this is your religion.”ⁱ

I love that list of verbs Doug gave his son Daniel to describe what people who follow Christ are called to do: **Heal the wounded, restore the lost, challenge what is evil, enlighten the blinded, repair the broken.** That part of his instruction sounds almost verbatim what we heard from Third Isaiah in chapter 58, in the wake of the return after the Babylonian Exile which was difficult and hard. Those people were also reviled and persecuted, even as they returned from exile it was rough going. That was about 500 years before Jesus taught this lesson on the mountain to his disciples. What Jesus was preaching to them was not new. As he carefully explained, Jesus was fulfilling and enlightening what they all had been taught, what was true according to the law and the prophets. Like the prophet Isaiah 58:6-12. He was resetting his disciples back to their core: being called to living in right relationship with God and neighbor.

Twenty-eight years after I was given my third-grade Bible it was a brilliantly sunny day in May of 1992. I had on a cap and gown, at the foot of Mt. Tamalpais, as I prepared to read this text during my graduation ceremony from Seminary in San Anselmo, California. It was the text the commencement speaker had chosen to send us forth across the country with our freshly minted Masters of Divinity degrees in hand, ready to get busy with the work of being pastors. From that day, this core text also became a touchstone to help me remember on those days

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when the busyness threatens to get in the way of the real work of the Gospel: “This is your calling, this is your religion.”

Since 1992, the word “religion” has taken a real hit, especially among millennials and younger people. “Nones” are on the rise, that’s “n-o-n-e-s” a term for those who declare, “I’m spiritual..but not **religious**.” When asked about church affiliation on a form, they would check the box that said “none.” It has become a popular way of saying, “I believe in God and I’m a spiritual person, but I just can’t align myself with that boring, hypocritical, homophobic, hurtful, institutional church. Just give me Jesus, and I’m good.” Somehow the word “religion” became synonymous with the worst of many people’s experience with the institutional church. The word “religion” actually comes from two Latin roots: *re – ligare*, which literally means to connect and therefore to reconnect. Yes, the core purpose of a religion is to re-connect, restore, repair: us with God, and us with one another, for the good of the whole. This is what Isaiah and Jesus are talking about. This is our religion. Thanks be to God.

For Christ followers, the Matthew text sheds a clarifying light on what it means to be a Christian. Jesus takes from prophecy from his own tradition, “light breaking forth” whenever justice on earth takes a step forward. But then he lights it up with very present power and glory. “YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD” It’s not a transactional, if you do this, *then* you will have the light. Jesus says: that light is a God-given gift, a super power if you will, within us all. We don’t have to earn it. It’s already there, waiting to be ignited, unleashed and let loose on this dark and broken world. Why are things in such a mess? We are holding out. We are putting bushel baskets over our light. And over other people’s light.

Jesus made this point when he looked across the crowd and said to all of them (if it was a crowd today, half of them would be on their cell phones checking Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter. Another half might have an ear bud in, listening to a game, others might wonder when they took their last pain pill, or what time they have to go pick up their kids). But he looks at all them, just as they are, and says, “You are the light of the world.” Yes, you “are.” Not, you might be. Or you once were. Or if you clean up your act, then you will be. But full on: you are right now, whether you feel like it or not, whether you believe it or not: you are the light of the world. If he was speaking to us today, he might have said, “You are the WIFI of the world!” You are the google of this earth!” Whatever is essential to connecting this world with God and each other: that’s what you are. And that’s we are even better at, together. This is our religion.

Your light is like no other person’s. It is unique and shines as no other person on this earth could possibly hope to. We were made to shine. All of us. The truth is, when we work to help every child, woman, man and creature truly shine, we create discomfort in people around us and in the holders of power. King Herod had already imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist at this point in Jesus ministry. Jesus would ultimately be crucified for this message. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, Mahatma Ghandi, and Martin Luther King Jr. were also assassinated for the same reason. So much power yet to be released. But it’s up to us. What really is our religion?

It's about what we do. At the core, belonging to Christ is about how we behave. What actions we take. Matthew's gospel pulses with this truth on every page. Our actions show what our religion is. I saw our religion here this past week. Preparing and hosting a beautiful funeral luncheon, took many hands before during and after. The vision of red aprons in the kitchen, at the dishwasher, serving table, Divine Love on tap in and around Joey Mulholland's grieving family, our light was shining. Going to four hardware stores, and one welder to fix a trapeze for a dying member's home hospital bed; packing hundreds of lunches for food insecure children who live right here in Marshfield for the NOW program. Yes, our world was getting a little brighter, one peanut butter sandwich at a time. Deacons voting to use Silent auction proceeds to buy a third knee scooter because two isn't enough to supply the growing needs of those who come to us from across the community for free medical supply loans. God's light shines forth across our community in the form of essential equipment for anyone (it doesn't matter what they believe or where they live) who needs this kind of help on their road to restoration, recovery, repair.

This is why we have come into the world. This is why we have been called to be church here at FPC. Poet Mary Oliver paints a picture of a forest to help us see from another angle, what Jesus is talking about. It is titled "When I Am Among the Trees." Picture each of us in these pews and all in our community as a tree as I read it.

*When I am among the trees,
Especially the willows and the honey locust,
Equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
They give off such hints of gladness
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.*

*I am so distant from the hope of myself,
In which I have goodness, and discernment,
And never hurry through the world
But walk slowly, and bow often.*

*Around me the trees stir in their leaves
And call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.*

*And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
Into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
With light, and to shine."ⁱⁱ*

For us at FPC, this is our religion. Thanks be to God.

ⁱDoug Hammack, *Rethinking our Story: Can We Still Be Christian in the Quantum Era?*, (Resource Publications: Eugene, OR, 2014), pp.115-116.

ⁱⁱ Mary Oliver, *Thirst*, (Beacon Press: Boston, MA, 2006), p.4.