

5th Sunday after Epiphany A 05 March 2023
Matthew 5:13-20; Isaiah 58:1-12
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Let's pray: ...

This morning, I want you to think of one thing that's going on in the world today that's important and matters to you. Something you follow in the news, that you have opinions and beliefs about; maybe you even post about on social media.

There's no right or wrong answer here. It could be, for example, how you'll vote if the present government holds a referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. It might be about climate change, the health of our environment, growing violence around the world, racism, discrimination or violence against women, Israel and Palestine, or Russia and Ukraine. It might be about the direction our country is moving in, or ideological polarisation and divisiveness in our world. It might be about the decisions that'll be made at the General Convention of Synod that affect our Church.

I reckon the hardest part is to pick only one thing. But for today, one will do. What's eating at you the most? ... Now let me ask you this. Does your worship on Sunday affect how you see and deal with whatever it is you chose?

In what ways do the Sunday prayers, the scriptures, the Body and Blood, inform and guide your thinking? Are they the lens through which you see the world and others, hear the news, and make decisions? Do you carry them with you through the rest of the week as you "go in peace to love and serve the Lord"? Do Jesus, the gospel, the law and the prophets, have anything to do with our politics, economics, social values, and personal decisions?

I'm treading a fine line here, getting close to stepping on people's toes. Maybe I've already crossed that line. But when I look at what's happening in the world today, what we're doing to each other – I wonder whether we're salt that's losing its flavour and light that's dwindling under a bushel basket.

That's the challenge Isaiah presents to us this morning. "Shout out, do not hold back!" God tells Isaiah. "Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion" [58:1].

Their rebellion is that they're fasting – doing religious stuff – for their own interest while at the same time oppressing others. They're fasting – doing plenty of religious stuff – but it hasn't changed the way they go about their lives. They still quarrel, fight, and strike "with a wicked fist" [58:4a]. "Such fasting", God says, "will not make your voice heard on high" [58:4b]. That's not the fast that God desires.

I wonder if that's also my rebellion. Do my actions reflect what I claim to believe about God? Is there more consistency with the gospel in my life, or contradiction? Is the religious stuff I'm doing, for the sake of the gospel and the salvific benefit and welfare of others? Or is it mostly so that I can tick a box and get on with gratifying myself?

It's easy to gather here each Sunday and say our prayers, nod in agreement with the scriptures, and sing our praises to God, but if those things don't spill out into the wider community, if they don't align our interests and concerns with God's mission to the world, if they're merely self-serving words to make us feel better about ourselves, the only thing they attract is God's admonition. "Call this a fast?"

Maybe we should spend less time speaking the truth about God and more time doing God's truth. Speaking through Isaiah, God says that means untying and freeing others from the bonds of injustice. It means letting the oppressed go free. It means sharing our bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into our house. It means giving clothes to the naked. It means resisting the temptation to point the finger at and speak evil of others. It means satisfying the needs of the afflicted. They include emotional and spiritual needs too. We can hunger for a meal and we can hunger for love. We can be homeless on the streets and we can be homeless within ourselves. Nakedness usually means having no clothes, but it can also mean being bereft of hope.

It'd be great if doing God's works was as easy as giving a fistful of cash, donating some food or clothes, or building a homeless shelter. But it isn't. Don't get me wrong; I'm all for those things and I hope we'll always be compassionate and generous. Those things are important but we need to be careful they don't become just another day of fasting in which nothing ever changes.

There's a lot at stake here, friends. As Jesus says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). This is deadly serious stuff! Our salvation is on the line here, Saints. Jesus demands perfection from his followers – no less! What to do!?!

I'm going to make a bold claim now and I may even sound conceited. But I want you to listen, think very carefully about what I say, cling to it, and make it yours too. My righteousness does exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. I'll say it again. My righteousness does exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. Am I being pompous, cocky, big-headed, too big for my boots?

Do I loose the bonds of injustice as God requires; undo the thongs of the yoke; share my bread with the hungry; bring the homeless poor into my house; cover the naked; not hide from annoying family members; refrain from pointing the finger and speaking evil of others, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted? Yes, and no. So, by what right do I claim to be so righteous?

Friends, my righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, because my righteousness is Jesus Christ. He's yours too! It is Christ's righteousness that secures our salvation; not our works – "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8.9).

However, works are necessary so that God's salt and light, his presence, is felt in the world. In fact, Christians are as indispensable to the world as salt is to food – "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:10). We must "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" as James [1:22] says.

Our righteousness is Jesus Christ himself and when the disciples asked Jesus, "What must we do to perform the works of God" (John 6:28)? he answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:29). Our greatest work; our fast; our day acceptable to the LORD is to believe in Christ and everything about him.

In our gospel reading Jesus says, “Whoever does [these commandments] and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19), and later in Matthew [22:36-40] he tells the disciples that the greatest commandment in the law ... is to love! It’s what we were created to do. We practice righteousness by loving God, our neighbour, each other, and ourselves, and claim to be righteous by believing in Jesus whom Love [God] sent.

This isn’t a cop out, Saints - a get-out-of-jail-free card. Jesus has already done that. Jesus has set us free. We are forgiven. That is gospel truth. But we must keep things in their proper order so that we continue to offer a fast acceptable to the LORD. We mustn’t put the cart before the horse. Think about it. Considering everything I’ve highlighted, how confident are you that you’ll walk out of here this morning and set the world on fire? I know that I can’t make any difference going solo. Neither can you.

But as a bride following her Groom; the body following the Head, together, drawing first from God’s deep well of faith, righteousness, and power, brought to bear by the Holy Spirit through the gospel proclaimed and consumed – that’s a different proposition altogether.

There’re over 2.2 billion Christian believers in the world. Imagine the impact a mob of lovers and doers of God’s works, God’s truth, God’s commandments so numerous has on the world. 2.2 billion saints flavoured with faith, hope, and love to sprinkle around. 2.2 billion saints shining Christ’s light into the dark recesses of this world, exposing evil. 2.2 billion saints, like you and me, “[with] the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16), following, praising, thanking, giving, and believing in him. What glory our Father in heaven receives!

Friends, Faith in Jesus is the fast that God desires every day, because it’s from this fountain of faith that God’s goodness flows, flavouring and lighting all of this world with his love. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your salt flavoursome and your light glowing in Christ Jesus. Amen.