

*5 Epiphany – Year A*

*Lections: Isa.58:1-9a; Ps. 112:1-9; 1 Cor. 2:1-12; Matt. 5:13-20*

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, Our Rock and Our Redeemer.*

Good morning Grace Church! It fills my heart to be able to break open the Word again with you this morning. And what a word it is that our lectionary has for us. I'll start with our Gospel passage. We continue with Jesus giving his Sermon on the Mount. Last week, we heard the first part, the pronouncement of 9 beatitudes or blessings.

This week, Jesus just keeps on preaching. You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world! Now, sometimes in his teaching and preaching, Jesus used metaphors that are a little hard to untangle or make sense of given the 2000 year gap between us and him. But these metaphors are ones we can still very much understand. Salt is meant to flavor or preserve food. Light is meant to illumine a room or a house. Salt without flavor, just like a light hidden away, is foolish and useless.

But notice who Jesus is addressing the metaphors to. *You* are salt and light, in the plural form. You all. But who, exactly is the “you all”? It is us. We who seek to follow Jesus, and perhaps more importantly, we who have just been blessed by him. In the beatitudes we heard the different conditions that merit different types of God’s gracious blessing. Blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. And now, Jesus is saying, don’t keep those blessings for yourselves. Don’t let your blessing lose its power, don’t hide it away. A blessing is meant to be shared, to be extended.

But notice how the lectionary adds in the next section of the Sermon on the Mount into this morning’s reading. At first glance, Jesus seems to be taking a strange and sudden turn here. We can usually sign on to the first half of this reading and the beatitudes that precede—this is the kind, encouraging Jesus we have become accustomed to. God wants to bless us? Yes, sign me up! Be salt and light and extend those blessings outwards, absolutely!

But hold up! Wait a minute! What's all this stuff about the law, and the commandments, and righteousness? Why does Jesus suddenly seem so :gasp: judgmental? Whoever breaks one of the least of the commandments that God gave to Moses will be called least? Our righteousness must exceed that of the notoriously pious Pharisees? What's going on Jesus?

Well, as some of you might know, Matthew's Gospel has one primary goal: to convince its audience that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, whom the people of Israel have been taught to hope for. And in these chapters, Matthew presents Jesus as the ultimate future prophet that Moses said God would send to the Israelites, in order to fulfill all that God had promised them on Sinai. Thus, it is crucial for Jesus to use these words "I have come not to abolish the law...but to fulfill it." And he does so in order to inaugurate the reign of God, or the kingdom of heaven as our translation puts it.

But what is the reign of God? And why would it be worth fulfilling every iota of ancient commandments in order to enter this kingdom of heaven?

Well, my friends, here is where I think there's Good News. You see, as our spiritual ancestors, the children of Israel, lived with the Torah, the law of Moses, and as they suffered calamity after calamity, invasion, and finally, an exile that turned their world upside down, they came to realize that what God intended on that first mountain, Sinai, was something more than a penal code. The law, as the prophets like Isaiah came to understand, was meant to point us towards God's dream of justice. And in that dream, people of all walks of life live in right relationship with one another. In that dream, there is a fair and equitable distribution of resources. And in God's dream, there is no oppression of any kind.

This then is what Jesus means when he proclaims that he has come to fulfill the law on this mountain. He intends to inaugurate the in-breaking of God's dream from the heavenly realm into this physical reality. And this is what we are blessed to do. The flavor we are meant to impart as salt and the light we are meant to shine is to start living in right relationship, to ensure the fair and equitable distribution of our resources, and to end oppression wherever we find it.

To quote one prophet Jesus was intimately familiar with, from our reading from Isaiah, this morning:

Is this not the fast that God chooses:

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?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.

And so my friends, let our light of justice, of righteousness, break forth like the dawn. Or in the words of a song I learned as a child growing up in church, and I hope you did to...

This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine!

This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine!

This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!