

Year A Epiphany 5 Matthew 5 vv13 to 20

You are salt and light for the world. “You” in the Greek is the plural “you” – all of you...all of you together are salt and light for the world. Again, I emphasize, God’s purpose is not to have an individual relationship with each individual person. The endgame is a complete 3-way reconciliation between people, planet, and God – all things reconciled to each other and to God. Why is this so important to keep in mind? God’s kingdom surrounds us. God’s kingdom is full of other people. If we love God but have a few bones to pick with the people around us then we will never achieve the full perfection of God’s kingdom. God’s kingdom is the world that gives us life, created by God to do just that. If we love God but do not care for the planet that sustains us then we will never achieve the full perfection of God’s kingdom.

We are salt and light for God’s kingdom. To reveal this kingdom, in which we already live, to the world around us that does not yet see it, we must be – together – both salt and light. Salt that works to enhance flavour, to bring out the best in what it has been put. Light – the glory that is God’s love and goodness and also light – that shines on the darkness to make it known, bring attention to the brokenness, so that it may be mended. Light lifts up the sin of the world in order that we may, together, work to change it. Just as Jesus is the Lamb of God that lifts up the sin of the world, we – his body on earth – continue that work with him. In order to be both salt and light – living the life of God’s kingdom, allowing what is already light and salt within us to prevail and to grow – our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees and of the scribes.

It sounds like Jesus – or Matthew, perhaps – is picking on the Pharisees and the scribes. Not all Pharisees and scribes are “bad apples” so to speak, but a culture

has developed among them that must be dispelled. It is much like the culture of discrimination and violence, that we saw in the news not too long ago, in the case of the beating death of Tyre Nicholls by five black police officers. I was very surprised to learn that the officers were black. I had wrongly presumed that this was another case of non-black police officers being overly aggressive toward a black male. I learned that the problem in the Tennessee police force – and elsewhere – is not a non-black police officer problem, it is simply a police officer problem. A culture of discrimination, entitlement, and life above the law exists in the police force such that even black officers will discriminate against, and use unjustified force against a black person. Not every police officer is a bad police officer. Not every scribe and Pharisee is getting things wrong. But there is a culture among the Pharisees and scribes of entitlement, of getting the laws to work for *their* interests, of accumulating wealth and power and using it unjustly. They *look* righteous, they are doing what the law requires of them. But they are not truly righteous. Once again, we are talking about righteousness in Matthew – righteousness being right relationship with God and with each other that then leads us into moral and ethical behaviour. The Pharisees and the scribes are not fully in right relationship with God and with their fellow humans. Worse yet, they are leading others down the wrong path as well. Jesus tells us we must be different.

Our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees in order to live the ways of God's kingdom. We do not have scribes and Pharisees in our midst. What does that statement mean to us in this context? We look to all church leaders and to the faithful who follow them, to the righteous among us, the ones seemingly doing everything right according to God's laws. How and why must our

righteousness exceed theirs? They are doing everything they should be doing according to God's laws, aren't they? Jesus specifically tells us that he does not want us to ignore God's laws – he has come to fulfill them, he says.

To answer all of the questions Jesus raises for us...How are we to be more righteous than the seemingly righteous? Why should we be more righteous? How does Jesus fulfill the law?...we turn to Isaiah because Isaiah was Jesus' "go to" as well.

In the reading we heard, Isaiah describes a people yearning for God, delighting to know of God's ways, asking God to make righteous judgements, and desiring to draw near to God. Yet there is a severe disconnect between their theology and their ethics. They believe they are yearning for God. They think they are seeking God's ways. Therefore, they do such religious activities as fasting. Outside of their religious activities, though, they engage in behaviours that we can only label as hypocritical. They quarrel, they physically mistreat others, they ignore those in need around them. They fast like the truly devout – head bowed, in sackcloth and ashes – just the way God wants, right? They lead the congregation through the service, wearing the right clothes, saying the right things, with reverence and praise. Just the way God wants right? They come to church and sit in the pews, standing at the right time, praying at the right time, sharing the peace of Christ with smiles and nods. Just the way God wants, right?

But when the sackcloth comes off and the fast is over, he punches his neighbour for letting his livestock come onto his property to eat his grass. When the worship is over, true story, the priest in a prominent Montreal church ditches his robes and has lunch with the other church leaders, trashing the parishioners who were

just sitting in their pews. And the one in the pew, doing everything right, then spends the rest of the week in his corporate office swindling the little guy and yelling at his kids to fight harder on the basketball court. There's no room for losers in my house, he tells them.

These are just a sampling of what is the hypocritical behaviour of those who appear to be righteous, those who proclaim a right relationship with God doing the right thing in the eyes of God on a Saturday in the synagogue or on a Sunday in the church. I haven't shared one of my favourite sayings for a while and now is a good time: As Mahatma Ghandi once said, "I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians." To go even further back, to Mohammed – the founder of Islam – he, in a nutshell, felt the same way: "I like your God, and I like your Christ; I do not like your Jews and Christians." God's kingdom exists not just in synagogue and church but everywhere. God's eyes are not just on us during worship and on Holy Days. God's eyes are on us all the time. The problem is not that we fall short of perfection. That's a given, actually. The problem is when people believe their Sunday worship, their devout religious acts, their personal relationship with God is the end of the obligation.

God's response to the narrowness of their devotion, to the small amount of their lives given to God out of the whole of lives lived contrary to God's ways, God's response is a question for us: "Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?"

It's not that God does not value the worship given. The point is that worship involves more than singing God's praises, fasting on the days set aside for fasting,

going to church and being “devout.” Especially when such acts of devotions are paired with acts unacceptable in God’s kingdom.

God lays before us the acts of the truly righteous – those in right relationship with people, and planet, and with God outside the walls of the worshipping space. The fast I choose, says the Lord, is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke, 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. In other words, we are to be constantly striving with God to mend the brokenness of the world. God’s purpose is our purpose. Ours is the ministry of reconciliation, says Paul, ours is the mending of relationships between God, fellow humanity, and the planet we are asked to care for. This is what Jesus meant when he said our righteousness must be greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees, greater than that of the church leaders and other Christians who do not show forth in their lives what they proclaim with their lips.

Why does God call this a fast? Why is it a fast to do good, to fight injustice? We must fast from the ways of the world in order to mend the brokenness – let go of the thinking that keeps us separated from God – for the world values its version of “success” and Jesus, in the eyes of the world, is a failure. Giving everything we can give, sharing all that we have, welcoming the unwelcome, loving the unloved...all of these gifts are foolishness to the world, says Paul. Striving with God to mend the brokenness of the world is also called a fast simply to equate it with an act of devotion to God. The act of devotion God wants most from us is the

work of doing all things possible to fix what is broken, to put our money where our mouth is, to walk the walk.

Then will our light break forth like the dawn, we are told. Then we will be salt for the earth and light for the world – all of us together – “you” plural, not “you” alone – because mending the brokenness is a huge job that we cannot do without each other and we cannot do without God. To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, to satisfy the needs of the afflicted: this is the fulfillment of the law, what Jesus came to do and to teach us to do. God’s laws are intended to obtain and maintain right relationship. God’s laws, when followed, will erase division, end inequality, and banish oppression and injustice.

When we do this, God says, “The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer...The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs.” God’s presence, in other words, will be noticeably present in the world. Through Jesus, God is laying healing hands on the world to make it “All right” and summon us to live lives of “all rightness.” Jesus does not throw out “the sincere concern of scribe and Pharisee, [of church leader and worshipper], for doing the will of God (adapted from New Proclamation Series A, p.150). He does not say these people are not righteous, but, rather, that we must be more righteous. Jesus takes us from where we are and lifts us higher. He encourages us to take our worship and make it broader, our acts of devotion and make them inclusive of our whole lives. With God as our rear guard, we “play a role in

mending the world as we are called to follow God in building, restoring, feeding, clothing, caring, and repairing individuals and community in need” (Juliana Claassens, workingpreacher.org).

Last week, in the Beatitudes, we heard Jesus list those who are adored by God and, today, this gives us the context for what Jesus calls us to be...salt and light. “Who are ‘salt’ of the earth? They are the humble, the ones who mourn, the meek, and those who thirst after doing what is right in the world. Who are ‘light’? They are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who receive abuse for standing up for what is right” (Emerson Powery, workingpreacher.org). We are salt. We are light. And we have mending to do.