

Fifth Sunday in Epiphanytide

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112:1-10; Matthew 5:13-20; I Corinthians 2:1-16

Isaiah 58:1-12. What is right worship? That is the topic of this powerful chapter from Isaiah – clearly one of the most significant chapters in that great book.

In this chapter, the Isaiac author criticizes the fasts in which the Old Testament Jews participated with great regularity. The fasts were an integral part of Yahweh worship in postexilic Israel. This prophecy is written about the fasts in which Israel participated. Thus, one can catch the revolutionary nature, Isaiah’s intent and the sheer power of this passage by substituting the word “worship” for “fast” throughout this document.

What is authentic worship? In this chapter, the author deals with the disconnect that exists between Israel’s worship and their life together as a community. He begins by stating, in essence, “Why is it that Israel wonders why God does not seem to bless them as a nation? He writes, “Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God” (58:2).

In other words, the author is stating that Israel was a very “religious” nation. It practiced its liturgies assiduously. Its worship was orthodox and was very carefully observed. It was doing its worship “rightly”. Yet God’s blessing of Israel’s national life seemed to be eluding them. And they were puzzled! From their standpoint, they were doing everything God expected them to do. Why, then, was his blessing not forthcoming? Thus, Israel asks, “Why do we (worship), but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice” (vs. 3)?

God’s response through Isaiah essentially is, “You just don’t get it! Even after the past several hundred years of your history and what I have sought to communicate to you, you still don’t get it! The kind of worship I want from you is not proper liturgies or right observance or a temple crowded with worshippers!”

What do you do on your Sabbath days, on your days of worship? “Look, you serve your own interest on your (worship) day and oppress all your workers. Look, you (worship) only to quarrel and to fight, and to strike with a wicked fist. Such (worship) as you do today will not make your voice heard on high” (vss. 3b-4)!

It is not true worship, Yahweh declares, for you to pray and sing hymns and involve yourself in the worship life and work of your church on the Sabbath day, and then go to your business on a Monday and “oppress all your workers”, seeking to get as much work out of them as possible for as little remuneration as possible (called “maximizing profit”). Arguing with each other, acting oppressively toward others, seeking to exert your own will on each situation is inconsistent with worship.

Isaiah goes even further. “Is such the (worship) that I choose: a day to humble oneself? Is (such worship) to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this (worship), a day acceptable to the Lord” (vs. 5)? The liturgies you perform in worship, how greatly you cry out in prayer or how deeply you bow or how much you raise your hands in

prayer is not what God counts as authentic worship. If anything, it is “show-boating”! That’s not what God wants at all.

What, then, is the worship that God wants? “Is not this the (worship) that I choose: 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 not (true worship) to share your bread with the hungry, and to 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 your healing shall spring up quickly. **Then** your vindication shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. **Then** you shall call and the Lord will answer; **then** you shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am’” (vss. 6-9).

True worship, Isaiah is saying, is a commitment to social justice! It is not liturgies or songs or the raising of hands or dancing in praise. True worship is working for justice. The authentic worship of God is the service of humanity. It is lived out in the way one seeks to shape one’s society, to defend the cause of the poor and oppressed, and to work for systemic change in your city so that all people are treated equally just before the law, so that all wealth is equitably distributed and earned, so that humans genuinely care for and do not seek to take advantage of each other. True worship occurs on Monday through Saturday – in the marketplace, in the shop, in the class room, on the football field or basketball court.

And when you worship like that, **then** – and only **then** will it be true that “you shall call and the Lord will answer, you shall cry for help and God will say, ‘Here I am’!” Only when you worship this way, will God respond to you, bless you and enrich your life. He will bless you only when you start to intentionally be a blessing to the people around you – but not before!

What, then, does God want? “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong” (vss. 9b-11a).

If Israel commits itself to acting justly, Isaiah concludes, then “You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (vss. 11b-12)! It is possible, the prophet declares, for human beings and the human community to build (or rebuild) their city into the City of God. But to do that, it will take the blessings of God upon our work. And those blessings occur only when we recognize God as sovereign (and not our own ambitions, beliefs or convictions) and give ourselves to acting justly, with mercy and with love to both our neighbor (including the alien “within our gates”) and to God under God’s direction. Then, truly, we will be worshipping rightly! And we will receive the blessings of our God!

Psalm 112:1-10 develops further the theme of the Old Testament for today. As Isaiah 58 describes the nature of true worship, so the author of this Psalm describes the nature of the true human being. And the Psalmists' description is the same as that of Isaiah's.

How would one describe the truly Godly human being? He or she is one who "fears the Lord", who is "gracious, merciful and righteous". The Godly human being is one who is generous, who lends money to those needing it without seeking a profit, who "conducts their affairs with justice", who is "secure in the Lord", who distributes his/her wealth freely and "gives to the poor". In other words, like authentic worship, the truly Godly human being is the person who uses his wealth and position in order to bring justice and an equitable distribution of wealth to all people, and who thus fights against the continuance of poverty in his country. She is one who is not only faithful to the Torah and the worship of God, but who extends such worship into each detail of daily life – being industrious, generous of spirit, just in one's dealings, compassionate toward all and especially caring for the poor.

The Psalmist then ends with an intriguing note. He concludes the psalm with the words, "The wicked see it (i.e., God's blessings of the just person) and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing" (vs. 10). In other words, there is a justice in life itself, the Psalmist suggests. Although those who seek to exploit and use people for their own benefit may get away with it for awhile, they will eventually be exposed for who they are and will be rejected by humanity. Because they are caught up in a competitive way of life, when they are so exposed, they will not be able to tolerate the success of the truly just and compassionate person, so that such success will "eat away" at them, and they will live life unsatisfied. Thus, their objectives in life "come to nothing"!

Matthew 5:13-20 makes a significant transition in the Sermon on the Mount from "blessings" to "commands". Matthew 5:1-12 has presented nine blessings – beatitudes given to the "have nots" of society, the "haves" and for those who, because of their commitment to Christ, are the "hurt" or persecuted of society. For all three types of people, Jesus proclaimed, there is a significant blessing from God if they seek to live in ways that honor both God and the kingdom that God is seeking to build throughout human society.

Beginning with verse 21, Jesus will present a series of "commands" that impact the very ways the "have nots", the "haves" and the "hurt" seek to live and act out their faith in God in the real world. Thus, Matthew 5:13-20 is the transition teaching that Jesus wants to give in order to enable God's people to shift focus from blessings to commands, while reflecting on these commands in the light of the blessings that have been promised to them. Therefore, this transition section asks the question, "What is the church's and Christian disciple's role in building the Kingdom of God?"

First, Matthew teaches through Jesus' words that the task of the blessed Christian disciple is to work for the transformation of the world. He does this by using two metaphors. "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world" (vss. 13a, 14a). Whether you are a "have not", a "have" or a "hurt" disciple of Christ, you are to be salt to the earth.

It is very important to recognize, in both the “salt” and the “light” metaphors, that the Greek word translated “you” is plural, not singular. It’s “you-all” or “you folks”, not “you” individually. The individual Christian is not as much called to be salt and light as is the whole body of Christ – and, therefore, the individual as part of that body! The differentiation is important, because Jesus is not proclaiming an individualistic but a communal gospel. Jesus is concerned with the entire body of disciples – that as a community, as a whole, they are acting out being “salt” and “light” to the world. Of course, that cannot be achieved unless each person is seeking faithfully to be “salt” and “light” – but it is seen primarily as a corporate way of being and acting that is only reflected in the resulting actions of the individual, not the other way around!

The second thing to note in both the “salt” and the “light” passages is that Jesus says “You-all are”, not “you-all ought to be”! That is, your very calling into Christ is a calling into being salt and light. Your salvation automatically makes you “salt” and “light”. Your salvation calls you into being salt and light, so that when God has chosen and called you to be God’s own, you are already called to be salt and light. It is not that you are simply chosen to be saved! It is that you are chosen to be saved in order that you might live out being salt and light to the world. You are redeemed in order to be sent on a mission. You are saved to serve. So, in essence, encouraging Christians to be “salt” and “light” is, in essence, saying to them, “Be who you are! Act out what you already are! You are already a “salt and light” being – so now be a “salt and light” doing!”

But what does it mean to be a “salt” and “light” doing? What is it, precisely, that Jesus is calling us to be and do when he calls us to be salt?

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot” (Matthew 5:13).

The mission of salt is to penetrate food! That’s its job. That is what it is called and chosen to do. Salt sitting even an inch away from food is totally useless! It needs to be on the food and in the food in order to penetrate the food.

This was of particular importance in the ancient world. Today, we use salt primarily to flavor food. But in ancient time, the flavoring of food was a secondary task of salt. Its primary task was to preserve that food. Salt slowed down, and even for all practical purposes in deeply salted food, stopped meat’s decaying capacity. Thus, no matter what sort of church your church might be – whether a “have not” people, a “have” or a “hurt” people (or even a medically-approved combination of these ingredients), that body exists not to gather within itself (except for systematic spiritual support, education and worship) but to be in its society *as a community of faith* working for the transformation of that society into a closer approximation of the kingdom of God. And, in the light of that corporate mission of the church, each of its members should be out in the world contributing to that transformation.

And if the church doesn’t carry on ministry this way, what then? “It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and is trampled under foot”!

Jesus continues. “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:14-16). Likewise, whether you are a “have not”, a “have” or a “hurt” disciple of Christ, you are to be a light of the world.

In changing the metaphor from “salt” to “light”, Jesus changes the message he is seeking to communicate.

It is important to recognize that Jesus is not simply using two parallel metaphors to describe the mission of the church. If he was doing that, then the metaphors could be reversed, so that the church being “light” could precede the church being “salt”. Rather, what Jesus is doing is building an argument regarding the mission of the church. That he is building an argument regarding the mission of the church is made plain in his “light” sentences (which, incidentally, break the rhythm of the two statements so that they are no longer parallel – which they would be if they were simply describing two parallel characteristics of the church), “A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (vss. 14b-15).

The light from the thousands upon thousands of lamps burning in all the homes and public buildings of a city creates a glow around that city that anyone approaching the city at night from far away can see. That glow then guides the traveler to the safety of that city. Likewise, a lamp on a lampstand brings a glow into the entire room in which the family is gathering, guiding them to seats in that room so that they might fellowship together. To put the lamp under a bushel basket or to somehow try to cover over the glow of the thousands of city lights would be ludicrous, because that goes against everything that light is seeking to accomplish. “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (vs. 16).

In other words, what Jesus is saying about the mission of the church in these two metaphors, is this. First and foremost, the mission of the church is to be who you are (salt). As the community of God’s people made up of have nots, haves and hurt ones, all of you blessed and empowered by God to be both who you are and what you have the potential to be in Him, simply be Christians (“Christ-ones”) in the world. Simply be in your actions what you already are because of God’s grace. Penetrate the “food” of the world around you, preserving in it all that God created it to be, and flavoring it with your presence. And if you do so, what you will discover is your capacity for effectiveness! Working together – simply being in your mission who you are in your essence – you will discover that you-all will become a “glow” in and to the world – a “glow” that guides the traveler home, that gathers the family for fellowship, and that brings joy and meaning to life!

Jesus has now set out in his “Sermon on the Mount” the blessings that God will give to those who are the “have-nots”, the “haves” and the “hurt” ones of the world that call them to be “Christ-ones”. He then lays out their mission – to be who God created and called them to be, and in doing so, to become effective in that mission. Now, Jesus moves to the next dominant theme of the Sermon on the Mount.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:17-20).

Beginning with Matthew 5:21, Jesus is going to begin a section where he will push the Jewish Law to its extremity as a way of calling his followers to a life together that is consistent with being “Christ-ones”. In doing so, he will also be able to demonstrate the absolute necessity of living life under grace rather than law, because it will become clear that no one can obey the full demands of the law without both being forgiven and graced by God. Jesus will draw these comparisons by using a particular device six times. He will say, “You have heard that it was said” and will then quote a portion of the Jewish Law; he will then follow that quote by saying, “But I say unto you”, and come forth with a new teaching that both presses that law to its extremity and gives a greater understanding of what it means to live as a community of Christ-ones (thus, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies”).

This, of course, is a most effective teaching device and a way of enabling people to clearly compare and contrast, so that they will gain a clearer understanding of God’s intentions for humanity that is to be lived out by the Christian community. But there is a real danger in this device. The danger is that people can interpret what Jesus is saying as a criticism of the Law and even a disrespect of the Law, encouraging its being disregarded by the Church (which is exactly what has happened over the centuries with different parts of the Church). Therefore, Jesus felt it was necessary to say something about the importance, centrality and immutability of the Law before using it to get his hearers to more intentionally live the Christ-life. That is the purpose for Matthew 5:17-20.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill” (vs. 17). Jesus’ apparent criticism of the Law that will soon follow could be interpreted by his hearers as an effort to abolish or disregard and set aside the Law. But Jesus insists, “I have come not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it”. The crucial word here is the word “fulfill”!

The English word “fulfill” means, today, “to execute”, to “measure up” or to “bring to an end”. But the Old English word had more of a meaning to “fill full” or “make full”. That was closer to the Greek word that is used here in Matthew, *plerosai*. That Greek word meant “to clarify the full meaning of” or “to make complete”. It was, literally, to “fill full”! Thus, when Jesus said, “I have come not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it”, what he was saying was “I do not wish to push the Law to one side, disregarding or disrespecting it. Rather, my interpretation of the Law (which I am about to give to you) brings the law to its full completion. It will enable you to understand its gifts and its requirements to a degree that you earlier did not understand. More than that, I have come to live out in my life the full implications of the Law so that you, both as

individuals and as a community of believers, can embrace the same for your life (and life together).” In a very real way, Jesus is informing his listeners that as the Torah and the prophets (the written word of God) have pointed the way to God,¹ so he has come to not only point the way to God as does Torah, but to also *be* the way to God!

What Jesus is essentially trying to accomplish in Matthew 5:17-20 is to preserve the authority and centrality of the Scripture. We need to keep in mind that the only Bible Jesus had was what today we call the Old Testament. There was no New Testament! The Torah and the Prophets was Jesus’ Bible. He knew that Bible extremely well (in fact, one of the intriguing realities of the four gospels is the way that Jesus uses the Hebrew Bible against Israel’s religious leaders, using their own scriptures to point out their limited understanding and interpretation of those scriptures). He used it throughout his ministry, believing that “until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished”. But he also recognized that he had come to “fill full” that Law with gospel grace, and thus even more effectively lead humanity both into an authentic relationship with God and to build God’s kingdom upon the earth.

Jesus concludes his endorsement of the Hebrew Bible with the words, “Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:19-20).

Jesus ends his endorsement of the Hebrew Bible with a very profound insight – an insight that will support his later use of scripture to call his Jewish audience to a more profound and acted out faith. In verses 19 and 20, Jesus changes the emphasis from understanding to obedience. In the Israel of Jesus’ day, the emphasis was on the right *understanding* of scripture. The leader of the local synagogue of every Jewish community – the synagogue to which every local Jew belonged – was called “rabbi” – “my teacher”! The Pharisees created their entire movement and each Pharisee’s career around the teaching of scripture. The Sadducees were responsible for adjudicating every lawsuit and every crime in Israel according to the teaching of scripture. Israel’s priests were to follow the minutia of the Law in leading Israel in worship – a minutia given to them from the scripture and from the writings of many students of scripture. The entire emphasis in Israel at the time of Jesus was on the right *understanding* of scripture. They were truly “the people of the book”!

But Jesus, beginning with these few words in the Sermon on the Mount, then throughout the remainder of the sermon, and then the remainder of his ministry, changed the emphasis. “Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments”, “whoever does them” – suddenly, the emphasis shifts from *understanding* to *obedience*! It is not that understanding is eliminated; it is still important to study, rightly interpret and to fully comprehend the scriptures. But study, interpretation and comprehension are not enough. The people who follow Jesus, the community that builds itself around Jesus must become the people who are *obedient* to scripture. They are to be the people who apply these scriptures both to their own lives and to their community of faith. They are to become the people who act justly, who distribute wealth equitably among themselves

¹ The root of the Hebrew rod for Torah, *yrh*, means “to point” or “to direct”.

so that no one is poor, who encourage each other in the strengthening of their relationships with both God and each other!

Thus, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of God”. Precisely! The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees rests upon their understanding of scripture. But do they apply it to either their daily lives or to the actions of the Pharisee party? Certainly not, for they do not share their wealth with the poor, they do not work for social justice in either their synagogue or in their nation, they build up their own wealth and the power of the Jewish religious aristocracy and do not seek to free all the expendables from their grinding poverty. They do not obey the very law they teach; rather, they ignore it. So their supposed “righteousness” is no righteousness at all. They aren’t going to enter the kingdom of God. But if you, hearers of the word begin to live your lives *obeying* the Law and the Prophets rather than simply *understanding* it, then your righteousness will indeed exceed that of scribes and Pharisees, and you will enter the kingdom of God! So not only learn from Jesus; follow him in obedience and join his effort to live out the Law and the Prophets, not only in your obedience of that Law but in depending upon God’s grace to work both in and between you-all to enable you to live faithfully to that Law!

I Corinthians 2:1-16. In the first chapter of I Corinthians, Paul had differentiated between the world’s wisdom and God’s wisdom. He had stressed that there are those who see the gospel of justice, equitability, elimination of poverty and relationship with God as scandal and folly. But there are also those who see it as God’s power at work shaping society into God’s intentions for it. There are those who are awed by the systems of apparent strength of a Rome or of a Jewish clergy aristocracy. And there are those who recognize that God’s power is revealed in our weakness (1:20-22). To be among “those who are called” (vs. 24) is to be among the foolish, the weak, the marginalized of the world. But because “we proclaim Christ crucified” (1:23) as a symbol of weakness and defeat, we actually belong to those who will transform the world. For our gospel of cross is also the gospel of resurrection.

Having stated the principle in chapter one that “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1:27), in chapter two Paul applies this perspective to himself.

“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (2:1-5).

Paul’s introduction to those first Corinthian citizens who eventually became Christians and the foundation for the planting of the Corinthian church was not an auspicious introduction. He didn’t “bowl them over” with great works of miracles, healings, or even of profound argument that won debates in the agora of Corinth or in its Jewish synagogue there. Instead, Paul came to them as a little and insignificant tent-maker, “in weakness and in fear and in much trembling”.

And why? Because, he wrote, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (vs. 2). In other words, it was Paul’s intent to neither impress nor stir the Corinthians with his erudition or capacity to inspire. Rather, he came to simply share Christ with those who were open to hear about Christ. Therefore, he had no intention but to be a “Christ-one” in Corinth, and through his humble service of one-and-all, to draw them to that Christ.

What Paul discovered, however, was the power of weakness. That is, by not trying to impress or overwhelm but simply by addressing people’s needs and sharing Christ one-on-one with people with whom he had developed a trusting relationship, the Corinthians proved amazingly receptive to the gospel. And what they discovered by discovering the gospel was the profound wisdom of that gospel that lay behind its simplicity and humility. Thus, what Paul shared with them in all simplicity opened to the new Corinthian Christians a world of “God’s wisdom secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory”. Those in political authority, holding great wealth or diviners of the spiritual mysteries of either Judaism or pagan worship couldn’t see it, because they were all caught up in maintaining the systems that had made them powerful and rich. But the simple people of Corinth, when opening themselves to Christ, could see it – and did see it and embrace “the wisdom of God”!

Of course, Paul’s argument did not apply simply to the powerful nonChristians of Corinth who had rejected or were ignoring the faith. He also meant it to refer to those members of the Corinthian Church who had become its sophists (followers of Apollos who had become the sophisticates of the church) or Pharisees (followers of Peter who had become the orthodox of the church). I Corinthians 1:10-17 told of how these followers had corrupted the messages of both preachers by turning their teaching into beliefs that excluded all other Christians who disagreed with them – something neither Apollos nor Peter intended. Both parties had become divisive in the church as each contended that they had the “truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth” while all the others were at least to some degree heretical. They had the authentic wisdom, and all else was foolishness.

So it is in chapter 2 that Paul makes two points. First, true wisdom comes out of foolishness, true strength comes out of weakness, true greatness comes out of humility. If the willingness to be a fool for Christ, to be weak and humble doesn’t underlie both the message and the messenger of Christ, then both that message and that messenger will become odious to everyone else! One will come across as arrogant and arbitrary, as the one who thinks he knows all things and looks down his nose at everybody else. And that kind of attitude will win no adherents to the faith or to the Church.

Second, Paul argues that the decision to respond or to reject must lie in the hands of the person receiving the message. It is not the Christian’s responsibility to win another to Christ or to persuade someone to his position. One’s responsibility is to humbly and lovingly share – and leave the response up to that person, and thus, to God. Thus, Paul explains, “those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny.” (vss. 14-15). If one is among God’s chosen, those who are receptive – then they will respond. If they are not, then they won’t. If a person is innately spiritual, he will discern the truth of what he hears. And he

will discern what is false. So trust the power of the message and of God as the true messenger.
After all, God doesn't need your protection in order to survive!

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