

February 6, 2017
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matt. 5:13-16; Isaiah 58:1-12

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

Last week we read the well-known passage from Micah where God has been expressing frustration with people who are not concerned about justice but are all about their showy worship rituals. Micah said “Look, God doesn’t need your sacrifices and burnt offerings. What God wants from you is very simple: do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.”

This week’s passage from Isaiah carries a similar theme. The people have been praying and fasting, but they feel like God is not paying any attention to them. So, God tells the prophet to tell it like it is. God says: Isaiah 58:1-12

When I was growing up there were some strict rules about fasting on the Lord’s day. You could not have any solid food within 3 hours of taking communion. You could not have any liquids except water within 2 hours. It could be really hard if you were going to church at 9:30 and you got up at 7:30. About the time I quit the whole church thing, they did away with all those rules. Murphy’s law I guess.

Once, when I was in seminary, I tried fasting one day a week. I could actually get extra credit in one of my classes for it. I made it about 3 weeks into the semester. Fasting made me feel spacy and to tell you the truth, it made me cranky. I know that’s hard to imagine. Shortly after I was ordained, the Presbytery of Florida adopted a program that included asking people to commit to a weekly day of fasting as a spiritual discipline to raise awareness of and compassion about world hunger. I was like “oh no. Now I’m an ordained minister and pastor of a congregation. Do I have to do this to set an example?” I checked with several of my local colleagues in ministry. Every one of them was like ‘no way.’ Whew.

I have known people who do find a spirituality in ritual fasting and that is fine. But fasting out of some vague sense of obligation or piety is meaningless.

The scholars think that this passage originally was written as a poem or a song. It is a song that begins as a lament, but like a lot of the Psalms, the tone changes to encouragement and promise. The people are lamenting because they feel God is ignoring them. So, the prophet is sort of letting them have it about that. Like Micah, he is saying: all this praying and fasting without action is meaningless. If you want to experience God in your life, you've got to do something:

loose the bonds of injustice,
undo the thongs of the yoke,
let the oppressed go free,
share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;

In other words, do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. If you do that, then it is going to be great. You're going to know God is with you.

Your light shall break forth like the dawn,
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
Then light will dawn on this weary world.

And about 500 years later, Jesus is sitting on the side of a mountain. If you've ever been there, you know it's not like what we would call a mountain. It is a beautiful grassy slope rising up from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Throngs of people have come out to hear him preach. They are people hungry and thirsty for God. They live in a weary world. There is no kingdom of Israel any more. There is a Roman occupied province called Judea. They are in need of the Spirit.

Jesus doesn't tell them to fast thank God. In fact, at the end of the day after feeding them spiritually, he feeds them real food, thousands of people fed from a couple loaves of bread and some smoked fish.

Jesus doesn't harangue them for their shortcomings either. He compliments them. He's proud of them. He's excited about genuine commitment to listen to his truth, change their lives and work toward a world of peace and justice. They are the salt of the earth, he says. Far from trying to stoke the flames of their anger at the powers that be, he says you are the hope of the future. He gives them words of courage and encouragement in a time of despair and injustice.

He promises light in a dreary world. But guess what? The light is not something that will come from beyond. You do not need to wait patiently for the light to come. You are the light. You are the light to the world. Don't hide your light deep within. Let your light shine and then you will see that your good works give glory to your Father in heaven.

How do you do it? How does the light shine on a weary world? The song tells us. Let's sing it out.

Light Dawns on a Weary World #79