

2-8-26 sermon

Isaiah 58.1-12; Matthew 5.13-20

As most of you know, I sat my first ordination exam on Friday. It was the bible competency exam, designed to assess whether those seeking ordination as Teaching Elders in the Presbyterian Church (USA) have a solid foundation in knowing the bible. I imagine that if I had taken this exam in my mid-20s, as many seminary students are, I would have struggled, and probably failed. As it is, I passed, probably because after reading and teaching the bible for 40 years, I have the kind of solid foundation that the denomination is looking for – simply by merit of age. Which makes me wonder about the fairness of this particular exam. But that's a discussion for another venue!

Having said that, it shouldn't surprise us that the Church requires this kind of foundational knowledge of scripture for its leaders. After all, Christians are “people of the Book.” Our scriptures are foundational for our faith. The Reformed tradition makes a big deal of this, summarized by one of the statements of the Reformation itself – *sola scriptura* – which makes the bible the sole source of divine revelation. As such, the bible is authoritative for life, as opposed to what the reformers understood the Roman Catholic Church to teach, which was that the final authority lay with the Pope and the magisterium in Rome. And that – where there was a question about how to interpret scripture – the Pope's word was final. Even if the Church was acting in ways that clearly *contradicted* scripture, such as in the selling of indulgences. You couldn't question the Church. Until Luther did!

So, we're people of the Book. Which shouldn't be too much of a surprise given what we just heard Jesus teach: “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.” If you're a King James Version kind of person, you'd have read, “not a jot or a tittle will pass away.” That “jot” refers to the Hebrew letter, ‘yodh,’ the smallest letter, which looks like an apostrophe. Jesus says, “You can't remove a single letter from the scriptures.” There's a lovely rabbinic story that gets to this kind of understanding of scripture. When God changed Abram and Sarai's names, Sarai – now Sarah – lost the letter yodh from the end of her name. So, every time she was mentioned by name, that yodh would be missing. The rabbinic story says that the Law mourned the loss of that letter, and so, when God commissioned the person who would follow Moses to be the leader of God's people – Oshea – God changed his name to Yeshua, or Joshua, by adding a yodh to the beginning of his name. Thus putting the missing ‘jot’ back into scripture. Maybe Jesus was even thinking of that story, given that he shared his name with Joshua, or Yeshua!

Jesus then goes on to underline the importance of knowing and keeping the commandments – the Law of Israel – by warning that if a person breaks a commandment – and teaches others to do so, that person will be called “least” in the kingdom of heaven, in this new reality that has come with Jesus. But if a person *keeps* the commandments and teaches others to do so, that person will be called “great” in the kingdom of heaven. All well

and good, and what we might expect a rabbi to say to his disciples. But then Jesus pulls the rug out from under his disciples' feet by saying, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees you will *never* enter the kingdom of heaven." I imagine the disciples might have turned to one another and said, "Wait, what did he just say? We have to be *more* righteous than the scribes and the pharisees? More righteous than the people who teach the Law? More righteous than the people who set the Bible Competency Exam? More righteous than the people who are the moral guardians of our life? How exactly are we supposed to do *that*?" To which Jesus might have responded, "I'm glad you asked! You'll do it like this..." And the Sermon continues with Jesus saying, "You know the Law says, "Don't kill." I say to you, "If you're angry with someone, you're opening yourself up to judgment." And so Jesus re-interpretation of the Law begins. In the Sermon he'll go on to name particular practices of the pharisees, saying, "Whenever you give alms... or pray... or fast... don't be like the pharisees, the hypocrites. No, give like this... pray like this... fast like this... Do these things, and your righteousness will exceed that of the scribes and pharisees."

Now, it's easy to pile on in Jesus' critique of the leaders of his people – "You get 'em, Jesus!" But their righteousness is rooted in a totally appropriate desire to remain holy. To be God's faithful people even in the most difficult of times, whether that be in exile in Babylon, or while their nation is living under occupation by Rome. The scribes and pharisees were determined to remain faithful to their God even under such circumstances, and to teach the people to do the same. They would maintain their identity as Jews, even under duress. That's appropriate, even admirable. So why does Jesus exhort his disciples to be different than their leaders? I wonder if the entirety of today's passage suggests one way we can answer that question. Because Jesus' critique is usually centered in the performative basis of the pharisees' faith, summarized later in the sermon with these words: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them, so that you may be *praised* by others." Which stands in contrast to Jesus' exhortation to his disciples here, where he says, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give *glory to your Father in heaven.*"

Our faith is to be visible – "you are the light of the world! Don't place it under a bushel – don't cover it! Let your light shine before others, but live in such a way that people praise God, and not you." And *that's* the distinction. There's a form of public piety that is non-offensive, that even draws the admiration of others. It's the kind of public piety that offers "thoughts and prayers" when people suffer, instead of doing something tangible to address the cause of their suffering. It's the kind of public piety that is on display at events like the National Prayer Breakfast, which may have begun with good intentions, but which now appears to be just another partisan political gathering, with a nod to God here and there. It's the kind of public piety that will pray for a President, support his policies, regardless of how much harm they cause your fellow Americans, but which refuses to condemn not only a repulsive and racist social media post, but also offers only silence when no ownership or regret is offered

for the post. It's the kind of cynical public piety that may play well with ones constituents, but which the prophets had no time for, as we heard in the reading from Isaiah.

But there's a form of public piety that causes people to praise God and not the pious themselves. A public piety which often draws *unwanted* attention from the powers that be. Because the Law and the Prophets called Israel to live a life completely distinct from that of the nations that surrounded them, which Jesus doubled down on in the Sermon:

He gave them a new way to deal with offenders – forgive them.

He gave them a new way to deal with violence – by suffering

He gave them a new way to deal with money – by sharing it

He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society – by building a new one from within, rather than destroying the old one from without.

But this is not really something new, at least, not to the prophets, as we heard in the reading from the prophet Isaiah this morning. The people of Israel were crying out to God for deliverance from the oppression of Babylon, accusing God of ignoring their plight – even when they engaged in such public piety as fasting and wearing sackcloth and ashes. “Why do you not see our public piety? Why don’t you hear our cry?” To which God responds, “is this not the fast I choose? To loose the bonds of injustice. To share your bread with the hungry. To bring the unhoused poor into your homes. To clothe the naked. Not to ignore the plight of your own kin? Do this, *then* your light will break forth like the dawn. Then you’ll fulfill the Law I’ve given you, and your healing shall spring up quickly. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer, you shall cry for help, and God will say, “Here I am.”

*That* is the kind of visible faith that the prophets – and Jesus call *us* to. And it is that kind of teaching, and that kind of visible faith that will ultimately lead to the pharisees conspiring with Rome to kill Jesus. That is how his disciples’ righteousness will surpass that of the pharisees: by living a life that does not prop up empire, but rather by living a life that is *subversive* of empire. That is subversive of those who declare, ‘might makes right.’ Subversive of those whose preposterous wealth enables them to shape public policy that benefits them, who can ignore the plight of the vast numbers of the poor – because they never have to come into contact with them. And which also enables them to avoid accountability for their heinous misdeeds. The scribes and the pharisees did little to confront the ideology of Rome. *Their* public piety didn’t threaten the occupying force. They weren’t “salty” at all, nor did their light do anything to expose the tyranny their people lived under.

And so it’s not the leadership of Israel that Jesus calls to himself to establish this kingdom of heaven that has come with him. No, it’s ordinary folk. It’s fishermen, and tradespeople. It’s a revolutionary, and a tax-collector! People who hardly saw themselves as righteous, because they couldn’t keep the purity laws of the pharisees. But it’s to them that Jesus says, emphatically, “You – yes, *you* – are the salt of the earth! You – yes, *you* – are the light of the

world!" And I picture the disciples looking around at each other, and saying, "Who, us? But we're... nobodies. We're ritually unclean most of the time.

We couldn't pass a bible competency exam."

To which Jesus might respond, "Yes. But when I called you to follow me, you did! You left your former life behind to do so. Immediately. You heard my call for repentance, and want to enter the kingdom heaven with me. To form a whole new world within the shell of the old, that world which serves only those with power. So, yes, *you* are the salt of the earth. *You* are the light of the world."

Let me end by briefly telling you about someone who was salt and light for me. An ordinary person. Physically unattractive. A strong woman in a church that couldn't deal with strong women. Opinionated, and loud about it. A woman who loved the scriptures. A woman who prayed. And a woman whose door was always open. Especially to teenagers. Especially to troubled teenagers, or those with nowhere else to go for support. One of whom moved in with her family for a while, and then lived there for almost 30 years. Someone who did *nothing* in order to earn the praise of others. Whose only desire was to serve God in the ways she thought she could. Someone who would eventually host a church in her home, that now meets in a former pub called 'The Mole's Rest.' My friend, Joy. Who, when I was twenty one years old and trying to be a pastor in a church where the elders didn't want a pastor, but the members did. When I was physically and emotionally spent from holding a full-time job and trying to serve as a pastor and on the edge of collapse and had gone to the elders to explain my situation, and ask for help, instead of understanding, I endured an hour of the litany of all the ways I'd failed, and all the reasons why I could never be a pastor. When I stumbled out of the church building, my feet carried me to Joy's door, who listened, and asked questions, and spoke truth to me and prayed for me. And – in a rare break from her normal practice – gave me a quick hug before I left. In some ways, the only reason I'm here today, is because of Joy. And I praise God for Joy, whose good works have far outlasted her life. Whose light continues to shine through those she loved.

*You are the salt of the earth.*

*You are the light of the world.*

May our light shine in such a way that people give praise to God. May our righteousness exceed that of the publicly pious. May we fulfill the purpose of the Law – to participate in an alternative to the world of wealth and power. To be Joy for anyone who needs a Joy. And, in the words of Henri-Frédéric Amiel, to embody this charge: "Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind." May it be so. Amen.