

Salt and Light

Last week we had quite a kerfuffle after the mass, after our traditional lion dance celebrating the Chinese new year, when one of our more fundamentalist members sort of freaked out over the celebration.

He was raised in a tradition that sees God and our faith very narrowly; with a great emphasis on believing exactly the right way, or risk facing an eternity in hell.

So rather than seeing the celebration of our host culture in this church as a thing of joy, he was deeply offended and very angry.

Which brings to mind a question.

Why is it so much easier to be consumed with being right about our ideas of God than actually living the challenges of our faith, with all of its ambiguity and uncertainties?

Perhaps because actually living our faith brings us face to face with our fellow human beings, on their terms, not ours, and truth be told, our fellow human beings are often — a pain in the neck!

I have a hard enough time hanging around with MYSELF most days, let alone the houseless gal who's made her home here at the church, rejecting every effort to get her into shelter.

Not to mention the 8000 folks asking where's the AARP Tax Service, as they walk right past the giant sign outside my office door — directing them to the hall.

There are days when I find myself muttering along with Linus from that Peanuts cartoon:

"I love humanity, it's the people I can't stand!"

None of this is new.

Our first reading has crotchety Isaiah, spouting off 2700 years ago about the vast difference between looking good in our faith as opposed to doing the hard work our faith actually involves.

Faith, Isaiah insists, isn't about following rules for rules sake, nor is it about beating ourselves up or feeling miserable.

It's about sharing our bread with the undeserving hungry.

Clothing the willfully naked.

Sheltering the houseless, even when drink and drug causes the problem.

In short, it's not so much about believing some correct doctrine, or avoiding those who are different, it's about doing our best to improve the lot of our fellow human beings on this good earth.

But why?

Not because it feels good, it often doesn't!

Not because it's something we're naturally inclined to do; we aren't!

We do this stuff, quite simply, because Jesus tells us to.

You are salt!

You are light!

NOT — you WILL be — you COULD be - you MIGHT be.

You ARE!

And what does salt do?

It seasons everything it touches, never discriminating between the just and unjust, the deserving and the wicked.

It simply seasons.

You are salt!

And you are light!

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran minister who is arrested and executed for plotting to assassinate Hitler, thought deeply about these truths while sitting in a Nazi concentration camp.

He says:

“The followers of Jesus are not faced with a decision.

The only decision possible is already made for them.

Now they have to **be** what they **are**, or they’re not following Jesus.

The followers are the visible community of faith; their discipleship, a visible act which separates them from the world — or it’s not discipleship.

Discipleship is as visible as light in the night, as obvious as a mountain jutting up from the flatlands.

To become **invisible**, is to deny the call.

Any community of Jesus that wants to be invisible, is no longer a community of Jesus.” Bonhoeffer, 2001, 134 paraphrased.

Just as salt is indiscriminate in what it seasons, so light shines everywhere, on everything and everyone.

No one is left out, no matter how odd or egregious or weird.

Which is maybe why Jesus wraps up today's lesson by insisting that the Law and the Prophets remain - he doesn't eliminate them, he completes them.

Many of us think of the Law as something to keep people in line, but that's not its purpose.

The purpose of the law is to create a just society.

The commandments are all about how to live in right relationship with God, and with each other.

We worship only God because God is the only reality worthy of our worship - even though we are often lured into worshipping football or Beyonce or our new car.

Perhaps you saw the headline last week about the Chiefs being the new football dynasty.

It read: "Thy Kingdom Come!"

Oy vey!

The law says: "Don't go there!"

We don't steal, lie or engage in fraud with each other, because when we can't trust each other, we can't live with each other.

And then there's the part of the law we never dared try: the Jubilee year, every 50 years, when everyone starts over: all wealth is

redistributed, every debt forgiven, everyone begins anew, from the same starting line.

And what about the prophets?

They show up when the people forget to live justly with each other.

They remind everyone that faith in God is not about pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye, but about the here — and the now!

This isn't me saying so; it's God, speaking through Isaiah:

“Is not this the fast 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 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?”

Jesus knows that the will of God is to restore God's creation to its original beauty and innocence and wonder.

And yet, fear and a desire for power and insecurity and ego and pride and greed too often turns us from followers of Jesus into mere admirers of Jesus.

We instinctively fear loss, abandonment, death.

But when we follow, rather than simply admire, Jesus, we can leave all of that, particularly the fear, behind.

Because in Jesus, death is defeated!

The absolute faithfulness of God is proved — Christ is risen!

So we can be brave, especially as we come face to face with one another, especially when “one another” means the houseless, the sick, the addicted, and yes, the fundamentalist too.

And when we meet these folks not on our terms, but on God’s, what we find is that they too are human beings: afraid, alone, fearing abandonment, loss, and death.

The truth is, “Jesus doesn’t call us to love suffering, but to love **those who suffer**, to live vulnerably in solidarity with them, to alleviate and end suffering by overcoming evil, with grace.

Sharing in the sufferings of Christ means joining him in loving others deeply,” especially the least, even when it’s hard, even when the love isn’t deserved; because that’s how God loves me, and that’s how God loves you. Flood, *Healing the Gospel*, 84.

“In the suffering God we meet the protesting God — who wants us to weep, to question, to resist.

The cry against injustice is planted deep within the human soul precisely because God pushes us to question suffering and injustice.

Our faith isn’t so much about high brow discussions concerning the nature of God, nor is it about a passive acceptance of suffering or wallowing in guilt; it’s about joining with our protesting and suffering God to end human misery, to end injustice.” Id. at 85, paraphrased.

Perhaps the cross stands at the center of our faith — so that one day, because of our faith, there will be no more crosses.

Is it worthwhile?

Just listen to Paul....

"No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

You are the salt of the earth!

You are the light of the world!

So go, and **be** what you are!

+amen