

Trusting Grace

Isaiah 58:1-9a, [9b-12]
1 Corinthians 2:1-12, [13-16]
Matthew 5:13-20
Psalm 112:1-9, (10)

One of the most startling things to me about Jesus is his unimaginable trust in everyday people. Jesus trusted humans far more than we trust them, far more than we trust ourselves. Today's passage from Matthew highlights this remarkable reality and invites us to question if our reluctance is perhaps misplaced.

In today's reading from Matthew, we see Jesus teaching the disciples on a hillside near the Sea of Galilee. This teaching is part of a much bigger sermon known as The Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard the part of the sermon where Jesus taught the Beatitudes, the "blessed are thes". The noteworthy thing about what he says today is because of when he's saying it.

If we recall the trajectory of Jesus ministry so far, we will see that he is only just beginning to get started. At his baptism, he was commissioned by God to begin his ministry. Immediately he went from Jordan's baptismal waters into the desert where he was tempted by the devil. When those 40 days ended, he went directly to Galilee to begin his work. Matthew gives us eight short verses explaining that Jesus called the disciples, taught in the synagogues, and healed people. Those eight verses make it seem like this sermon was given within weeks of starting out, but it may have been a few months. Either way, the folks who plopped down on this hillside to listen to Jesus were new to this. They were fishermen and laborers. They were not the highly educated, professionally religious, or wealthy elite. And they had not been following Jesus long enough to have acquired a strong hold on his theological assertions or doctrinal positions. After all, this was the first time he was even teaching them in a public and systematized way.

So, when Jesus calls these people “salt” and “light”, he is not talking to disciples who had years of absorbing his teaching. These are not seminarians or Christian scholars. The people he is naming as salt and light are not special. They are not formally trained. They are not pious, model citizens. They are normal folks. And Jesus did not give them a list of behaviors they must perform or teachings they must memorize to attain the ability to be salt and light. He doesn't say “you could be” or “you should try to be”. He simply tells them they are, already, salt and light. In fact, he implies that if they will be what they are, without allowing themselves to be covered over or diluted, that they will be integral to the healing of the world.

I'm not sure that's the message most pastors would preach if they were handed a microphone on the downtown mall. It's not how we have been taught to think. Religion has always tried to give people systems to follow, behaviors to do, and things to accomplish to reform themselves into something acceptable to God and able to participate in the work of God's kingdom. But Jesus sees people differently than we do. He sees us as we actually are, not our scars or perceived deficiencies.

When Paul writes about this to the Corinthians, he talks about the spirit of the world as opposed to the spirit of God. The one who operates from the spirit of God is awakened to God's reality, a life of abundant and transformative love. The one living by the spirit the world refers to what happens to us when we are controlled by the world's operating system, by rankings of power, scarcity, violence, and fear. But Paul says, “we have the mind of Christ”, the very spirit of God. He does not say we might get it if we try hard enough or if we're good enough. He says we have it already. It's as if Paul is saying the Spirit isn't adding something foreign to us. Rather, when we live according to the spirit, God is awakening us to participate in the consciousness Christ embodies; an awareness of our belovedness, that limitless self-giving love of God through us is the truest thing about us.

When Isaiah writes about this, like Jesus, he uses the metaphor of light to describe this powerful force that breaks forth like the dawn and rises out from the darkness. Human thinking wants religious behaviors to be what matters about us. But, according to Isaiah, God is not interested in the things we can do to prove our own piety. God's spirit works through us when we trust that we have what we need already. When we stop trying to make up for our perceived insufficiency, we can allow God's love to flow freely from us. That love creates solidarity among us, because it is something we all share. Knowing we are all loved and the source of that loving acceptance is limitless is what ignites us to loosen others' bonds, share bread, and repair breaches. This healing and restoration are not rewards for good behavior, they are the fruit of trusting God's love and knowing it is enough. When we stop clutching it as if it's a limited resource, the light comes pouring out of us.

The Psalmist shows us what this type of abundance looks like. A heart that is secure in God's love is generous. It doesn't fear scarcity, so it is able to freely do justice and righteousness. The psalmist also likens this type of internal wealth and strength with light shining in the darkness.

Paul tells us that the world's system operates from fear and competition which leads to a need to dominate. But God's wisdom, the mind of Christ, the spirit that is in us awakens us to the wisdom we do not need to earn. It is this spirit that enlightens us in what has always been true. We are endlessly beloved. We are salt. We are light.

As beautiful as our religious heritage is in so many respects, it has also often tended to focus on our sin. But our problem is not fundamentally that we are defective. Our problem is that we forget who we are. When we forget that we are God's beloved children, that's when we become obsessed with our sin. When we forget we are loved, we act from fear instead of trust. We hoard instead of share. We perform religion instead of doing justice.

Immediately after Jesus told these regular folks that they are salt and light, he tells them that performing the requirements of the law is impossible. Jesus was not biting his fingernails when he said this. The true requirements of the law were never meant to be about perfect performance. It has never been shocking to God that we cannot behave perfectly. That didn't stop Jesus from telling them they ARE salt and light. What if spiritual formation is not about fixing what's wrong with us? What if spiritual formation is about remembering what is true about us?

The 4th century church father, Gregory of Nyssa said, "Being like the divine ... is part of the generosity of God who freely, at the birth of the first man, gave our nature a likeness to Himself. The human effort extends only to this: the removal of the filth which has accumulated through evil and the bringing to light again the beauty in the soul which we had covered over."

Our modern preoccupation with sin comes from a warped view of Saint Augustine's teachings regarding what he called Original Sin. Augustine never intended us to believe we are evil or inadequate. He wanted us to realize that our nature is to turn away from God when God is the source of who and what we are. Turning away from God is essentially turning away from ourselves because it cuts us off from our source. Worse still, turning from God causes us to turn against one another.

Jesus tells us to let our light shine. He says that because he understands that we live in a world that lies to us about who we are and God's resources available to us. Those lies are like a basket that quenches our light under its darkness. What could happen if we stopped worrying about what we don't have and started living from what we do? What if we stopped judging ourselves against one another, believing someone else is somehow more or better? What if we genuinely trusted that we are not defective? What if we trusted God enough to stop living from fear, and start living from the abundance of God's limitless love?

May we be a people who trust ourselves and one another as much as Jesus did, so we can genuinely live to season and preserve this world as salt and brighten this world as light.