

February 9, 2014 Isaiah 58:1-12 Matthew 5:13-20 "Letting the Light Break Forth"

It has been said that no one snowflake feels responsible for the avalanche. Perhaps. The reality is that for the most part, we really do not know just what impact our words, our actions, our lives have on the world; either for good or for evil. The kind word said to a struggling young person, a careless remark tossed out. A decision that seemed insignificant at the time but was watched by others who were influenced one way or the other.

Who influenced those athletes at the Olympics to keep on practicing, to keep on working, to keep going against all odds? Who influenced Johann Sebastian Bach to write music? Louis Pasteur to look through a microscope, Rene Descartes to think philosophically, Vincent Van Gogh to paint, Gregor Mendel to record the way peas grew in his garden, Abraham Lincoln to go into politics, you to be the person you have become??? Those unsung heroes affected the course of history.

Or who was not there to help Adolph Hitler, Charles Manson, Pol Pot, Adam Lanza—or could anyone have made a difference to stop the evil that overcame their lives??? How many people who had every reason to end up with terrible lives have had their lives changed—become assets to the world because someone took the time to care. Only God knows.

Every Vacation Bible School I've been part of through the years always had as part of its music, "This little light of mine - This little light of mine, I'm gonna' let it shine...let it shine, let it shine, let it shine..." Every time I hear it, it leaves me with the question: "How am I being called to let God's light shine in my life?"

Both of the scriptures for today address this issue, for they both challenge existing religious practices and suggest that God wants our actions to be communicators of God's light... One message seems to be that being "religious" is not the same as being faithful to God. Each passage contrasts a deep loyalty to the Lord with a religiosity that turns into a sham.

Consider the Isaiah passage. Jerusalem was a dump. The Jewish exiles had returned from Babylon only to discover that the "holy habitation of the Most High" had been reduced to a slum of broken city walls, ruined foundations, and unsafe streets (vs. 12). Wealth was unevenly distributed, with the rich hoarding their resources while letting the poor go hungry. Violence reigned, and citizens avoided their social responsibilities (vs 6-7). Instead of taking on the task of urban renewal, the people buried themselves in fasting and prayer: "They delight to draw near to God" (vs. 2). The prophet poked fun at their assumption that being religious would hasten God's intervention, and pointed out that the very ones who fasted did so while their servants were harshly oppressed and made to work for their owners' profits.

The first part of the passage shows the empty rituals by which the people were hoping to "pull strings" in heaven.... Then the people's questioning as to why all their religious fervor hadn't made things better for them: "Why have we fasted, and God not seen us? Why have we humbled ourselves, and yet God has not acted on our behalf?"

Through Isaiah, we are told that God isn't interested in human beings humbling ourselves so as to "earn" God's favors. God is interested in a dedication that results in justice for those who are weak or needy. In other words, "Don't try to puff yourself up in God's eyes by being religious. Instead, give of your life to show God's love to another person."

Jesus' teaching in Matthew would agree with this. The verses speak to people whose faith had become limp and and meaningless, focused on themselves. Satisfied with the taste of bland belief, they fail to season the world with God's grainy, challenging truth. Content with what light they found within, they had forgotten that a lamp is meant to illumine the house, not a basket. As the prophet Isaiah called Jerusalem from religiosity to justice, so the gospel of Jesus Christ calls the church from hidden belief to faith that others can see and taste. Somebody once said: "It should not require X-rays to determine that we are Christian." (Source of quote unknown)

The people in Jerusalem fasted and prayed to try to force God to make their own lives better. And the church folk in Matthew's time were forgetting to let God's light shine through their actions so as to provide light, not for themselves, but for the world; and not for their own glory, but for God's glory.

"You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world..." "If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as at noonday." "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly."

When we lived in Bayville (on Long Island), a woman came to talk with me every now and then, always bemoaning the way life was treating her. Nothing suited her: the bosses didn't give her enough respect, she couldn't find a man of substance, even the worship services at the church didn't satisfy her. Somehow, everything failed to give her what she needed. She'd sign up to help with something, but would end up showing up only occasionally, if the whim struck her. She had a lonely, dark existence because of her self-absorption. Whatever light she had was well-hidden.

The scriptures for today point to a way out of this kind of dreary, meaningless existence. They point to the way of giving first, and then receiving. Let your light shine, work to free others from their darkness, be the salt that God has created you to be, and God will handle things from there. "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly."

There is a story I'd like to share today, which has been particularly helpful in grief groups. Years ago a widow's son died in a tragic accident. The woman, crazy with grief, mourned her loss so deeply that no one could provide her with comfort. At last a friend took her to the house of a holy man where she made a sobbing plea. "Use your powers to bring my son back to life. Surely you are able by prayer or some magic to induce the Almighty to lighten my grief." The old man spoke kindly to the woman. "Bring me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. I will use that seed to remove the pain from your life."

Immediately the woman set out in search of the magic mustard seed. "First I will visit the home of a wealthy family," she thought. "Tragedy is less likely to strike them." Soon she approached a beautiful mansion, knocked on the door, and spoke to the woman who greeted her. "I am in search of a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? Please, it is vital that I know."

"Never known sorrow!" cried the woman who had answered the door. "You have come to the wrong house." As she sobbed she began to describe all of the tragedies that had touched her family. She invited the widow into her home to explain in greater detail what had taken place. The widow remained in the home many days, listening and caring.

When she left to resume her search, the widow visited a modest home about a mile away. The experience was the same. Wherever she traveled, from mansion to hut, she was greeted with tales of sadness and sorrow. Everyone found her to be a willing and careful listener.

After months of travel she became so involved with the grief of others that she forgot about her search for the magic mustard seed, never realizing that it had indeed driven the sorrow from her life. (pause)

"Let your light so shine..."

"Share your bread with the hungry..."

"You are the salt of the earth..."

It would seem that God wants us to discover that precisely what we ARE is what others need. If life has left you broken or afflicted or caused you to lose a loved one, someone else needs to share your pain. If you have been stung by the death of a pet or the trauma of losing a job or the challenge of not having enough money to make it through a month, there is someone else whose own burden can be lightened by sharing your sorrow. If you have plenty of food in your pantry, surely there is someone who is lacking who needs you to share it... The amazing thing about all this is that "blessing" never seems to go only one way. Doing a good deed in the name of Jesus feeds two, the one who receives and the one who gives.

I am reminded of James Russell Lowell's poem, "The Vision of Sir Launfal." Launfal wanted so badly to find the Christ that he made it his life calling. Spending everything that he had, he was so intent on his search that he passed a poor leper begging and ignored him. Years later, with his money and health all gone and his search a failure, Launfal staggered home, clutching his last bit of bread. There on the road was the same beggar, but this time Launfal's attitude was different. He took his last piece of bread and gave half of it to the beggar. In that instant he saw Christ, and his life was fulfilled. (Source: Poet's Corner, [theotherpages.org/poems](http://theotherpages.org/poems))

Christians of 2014, the call of Jesus and the challenge given us through Isaiah stand. We are to seek the way God has for us to serve in this world: to let light shine into dark lives and to let God's salt provide healing, spice, and the sting of cleansing.... We are to work for the good of every person within our reach.... This is the "fast" the Lord desires.

May each of us hear beyond words, in our hearts, the call to be salt and light for this world as we follow our Lord. No matter how old we are, no matter who we are, God has work for us to do. May we be useful to God, instruments of God's blessing. "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly." May it be so, in Jesus' name. Amen.