

We as people of faith are supposed to be different, in a good way. However, from time to time, people of faith have misunderstood how God desires for us to be.

For example, in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, God's people thought that being God's person meant being pious. They thought that they could please God by outward behaviors like fasting and putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes as an outward and visible sign that they were sorry for their sins and wished now to draw near to their God. The prophet explained to them that by doing these things they were serving their own interests, not God's. This show of affection for God was not what God had in mind when God called people of faith to be different. We might want to consider this as we approach the 40 days of Lenten observance in a few weeks.

No, what the prophet says that God has in mind for us is for us to be about loosing the bonds of injustice, breaking every yoke that oppresses those around us. This passage would suggest that The Rev. William Barber and others who have been crying out against the injustice which is perpetrated against the poor in our state are on the right track.

The prophet suggests other things that God requires of us, things like sharing our bread with the hungry, and bringing the homeless poor into our houses. We do this in a small way with our commitment to house the women with Room in the Inn. As good as it is for us church people to go out of our way for a week to house these women, I have wondered if we shouldn't work a little harder and figure out a way to provide a place for them in an offsite location where they do not have to move every week from church to church. The Room in the Inn

Program does wonders for US, but all that moving has got to be rough on the women.

The prophet also mentions covering the naked and not hiding ourselves from our own kin. If we are called to care for the stranger, how much more are we called to take care of our own kin, our own relatives?

Of course, these are just a few examples of how we as God's people are supposed to be different from others. These are just a few examples of how we are called to live for others, and not just for ourselves. Any little way that you or I can brighten the life of another is our calling, isn't it? And yes, all this is consistent with God's Law, but there is a sense in which that is not the point, is it? The point is that we are called to love. And Jesus, as an embodiment of love, teaches us that love is what God's Law is all about.

The result of being different in the way that God wants us to be different, the prophet says, is this, "As you live like you are called to live, then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am." In other words, when we do these things for others, God is pleased and God's light shoots out into the world and people, us included, are blessed and healed by God's light.

Jesus came with the exact same message as the prophets like Isaiah. However, in Jesus, the message was demonstrated for us. In this way, He fulfilled the Law, or filled it fuller with meaning so that people could grasp it. For example, the Law was pretty fussy about what people should eat and not eat. Part of that may have been to protect the

people. They had no refrigerators for shell fish, no ice for oysters on the half-shell. So, maybe they shouldn't eat those things. However, Jesus filled the message fuller by saying, "Actually, what a person eats just passes through the body and therefore is of limited importance." "But, on the other hand, Jesus said, what comes out of your mouth comes from the heart. Therefore, be much more careful about what comes out of your mouth than what goes into it." In this way, Jesus never negated the teaching of the Law. Rather, He amplified it, he fulfilled it by filling it fuller with meaning as He taught and explained it.

Regarding being different as God's people, Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot." I read this week that salt loses its taste and or its usefulness by being contaminated with other minerals. This often happened with the salt in the Dead Sea. It became so contaminated by other minerals that it lost its taste and its usefulness.

This may have some relevance to us as we hear Jesus say these words to us. You are the salt of the earth. But if we become so contaminated with other interests, other desires, that we forget who Jesus is calling us to be, it may be possible for us to lose our taste.

I am reminded of that old saying, "If they were arresting people for being Christians today, would there be enough evidence against us to convict us?" Or God forbid, has our saltiness, our Jesusness, been so contaminated that we have lost our flavor?

The next thing that Jesus says in our Gospel embodies a very similar idea. He says, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel

basket, but on a lampstand where it gives light to all who are in the house.”

The people in Isaiah’s time were going around trying to be all pious and humble, bowing their heads like bulrushes and fasting trying to earn God’s approval. That kind of false humility makes God sick.

The kind of humility that God is looking for in us is giving ourselves away for the sake of others, wearing ourselves out in doing good and then pointing to Christ as the reason that we do what we do. All these things that we are doing for others, caring for the poor, clothing the naked, bringing the homeless into our homes, it’s got nothing to do with us. We are being directed by Christ. It’s His love for the world. We are just boots on the ground trying to get it done. He is wonderful, and we are just following or working for Him.

This is surely what Jesus meant when He said, “In the same way as this lamp does, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

I think sometimes I have mistakenly misrepresented Christ and the Gospel, and for this I am deeply sorry. You see, I have been so keen to try and influence people for Christ that sometimes I have tried to do what St. Paul said not to do, and I have tried to peddle or sell the Gospel to others. And like any good salesman, I have done everything I could to make people think they are getting a good deal in coming to Christ. At times, I think that I have held the bar so low hoping that people would fall over it into the Kingdom. I am sorry for all of that. My intentions were good, but I am afraid that in doing so I twisted the message.

When people respond to such a message, in effect tripping over this low bar into the kingdom, they end up being like Ebenezer Scrooge, miserly Christians wanting to know how much of their lives they have to spend to get into heaven. The rest, which they hope is the majority of their lives, they will spend on themselves. They become carnal Christians, indistinguishable from anyone else in the world.

The truth of the Gospel is what we heard from our Lord Jesus today. These are His words to you and me. He says this,

“You are the salt of the earth. If the salt has lost its taste, it is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a bushel basket but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all the house. In the same way, Beloved of Christ, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

If you listen to Jesus’ words this morning and you live your life letting your light shine before all, if they come through your neighborhood arresting Christians, you will surely be arrested.