

Scriptures and Sermon for Sunday, February 5, 2017

Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12)

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

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?

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. If you remove

the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Matthew 5:13-20

[Jesus said:] "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? 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 hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. 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. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called

least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be found acceptable in your sight, O God. You are our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

Jesus was many things to many people during his ministry on earth. And Jesus is many things to many people in his ministry since he was resurrected and ascended to heaven. But one thing Jesus never claimed to be was a chemist, or a physicist.

A chemist, you say? A physicist? That's right. Somehow, long before the true science of chemistry and physics evolved into what we know them to be today, Jesus understood that no matter what you do to salt, it never loses its saltiness. Salt is both a literal and a symbolic treasure in ancient times, and even now. Salt is a preservative, a flavor enhancer, an insulator, a form of currency, and countless other things.

And Jesus knew that those who used salt as an insulator in the big mud ovens that baked bread threw out the salt that no longer insulated well. It was thrown onto the streets to fill pot holes. It was spread out on the streets to make the uneven roads smoother. But even when it had lost its ability to insulate, salt was still 'salty'. Even when salt was diluted in water, it still had its salty taste. Salt is still essentially salt, no matter what you do to it. The chemical bond between sodium and chlorine cannot be broken, and even though Jesus knew nothing of sodium or chlorine, he knew enough about salt to use it as a metaphor.

He tells us we are the salt of the earth, and that no matter what happens to us, we are still essentially ourselves, we never lose the essence of who we are. He tells us that we are the light of the world, a lamp that should not be hidden under a bushel basket. He couldn't have known that modern scientists would eventually understand that light is both a wave and a particle. Light waves act one way, light particles another. No matter which type of light we are, he doesn't want us to block our essential light to the world.

So I have to ask: how many of us came to church today wearing our bushel baskets?

I suspect that would be all of us. I don't think we can avoid going around in our own personal bushel baskets, and here's why: in the modern world, many of our peers don't even really know what their true light looks like. We don't even know what our essential self is. So, instead we put on a basket, one that conforms to whatever we think the world wants to see of us.

I wore the bushel basket when I spent my years working in the not-for-profit world for the developmentally disabled, avoiding my call. But it wasn't until I caught a glimpse of my light that I realized that I had been hiding it under a bushel basket for a long time.

If we were to stop and think about it, some of us might know someone in our lives who lets their light shine. There are people in our lives who have learned how to remove their bushel baskets, and be the essential people God created them to be. But for the majority of us, we still struggle to even understand who we are, and who we were meant to be.

Jesus was making an ironic point about salt: it never loses its saltiness. We never lose the essential nature of who we are. And he wants us to show

the world who we are, show the world our essential nature, so that the world can be a better place.

A bushel basket is a false covering. A disguise. A barrier. A hypocrisy. Like the people of Israel mentioned in our Hebrew scripture, the ones who fasted publicly, only to quarrel, to oppress others, a bushel basket obscures who we really are.

And while we may not have a solid understanding of what our light shines like when we remove our bushel basket, both Isaiah and Jesus have some pretty good ideas about how we should be acting as our essential selves: *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? No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

So much energy goes into projecting to the world the kind of people we want the world to think we are. None of us is immune. But the work of removing the bushel basket, the disguise, that is some scary work.

Jesus tries to reassure us that our essential selves can never lose their essence. But that doesn't make removing the bushel basket any less scary. And many of us will never remove that bushel basket, ever.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try! Jesus was trying to say that the scribes and the Pharisees, masters of wearing the bushel basket, are not the role models he would have for his faithful followers. No, we will need to have righteousness greater than the scribes and Pharisees in order to gain entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The scribes and Pharisees put on an incredible front in public, wore the finest clothes, wailed the loudest when fasting, looked miserable and hungry, and yet acted in the most unfaithful ways.

Isaiah says that if we can be true to ourselves, act faithfully as our essential selves, 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. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.*

How does that sound to you? Hide your light under a bushel basket, and you will probably fool most people. But not Jesus, and certainly not God. Let your light break forth like the dawn, and God will forever be your protector.

So, while I'm advocating that we each consider removing our bushel baskets, our superficial coverings that hide our personal light, I am highly aware that we can't just do that all at once. Some of us have spent our entire lives perfecting our bushel baskets. Some of us might actually think we are what our bushel baskets say we are. Some of us might not even agree that in order for us to be faithful we need to feed the hungry, or clothe the naked, or break the bonds of oppression, wherever oppression is lurking.

So I'm suggesting that we think about removing just one slat of the basket at a time. One slat to let a little light shine through. See how that feels. It might be really uncomfortable, but see if you can sit with it for a while. If you feel you must, you can always repair the basket, but I hope that each of us can find ways to remove more and more slats from our bushel baskets, so that ultimately, who we really are is what the world really sees.

And while we're on the topic, may I be honest here? Among our close friends and family, are we fooling anyone? Don't the people who love us, know us as our real selves? Aren't our flaws and shortcomings already obvious to the ones who know us and love us? We may not want to know this, but our bushel baskets may block our light from shining forth, but they don't fool many people. They don't fool God.

God loves us for who we really are. Flawed, and blemished, and insecure, and afraid. God does not love what we project to the world. God does not love the bushel baskets we use to hide our true light from the world. God loves us for the people God created us to be.

So the real question is, do we love God enough to try and remove our bushel baskets, or do we love the world more?

Can we take the risk of removing a slat from our basket, and see if the world cares at all? I think we'll be surprised that the world will hardly notice: we think the world notices all sorts of details about ourselves, but it's really God who notices that all our bushel baskets do is obscure the true self we were created to be.

You can do all sorts of things to salt, and it will never lose its saltiness. You can do all sorts of things to our essential selves, even obscure them to the world, but we will never lose the essential self that God created us to be.

Practicing being our essential selves can be scary. But in the grand scheme of things, it's the only thing we can do on our journey of faith. Being anything other than our essential self would put us in the group with the scribes and Pharisees, the hypocrites.

Let us try and be ourselves. The selves we were created to be. Let us not hide our light under the bushel baskets we've created for ourselves, but instead, try and find ways to remove some of the slats of our baskets, and see what shines forth.

To practice being our essential selves is to practice righteousness. To trust that God loves us just as we are, in all our glorious imperfections is to practice righteousness. To risk removing some of the slats of our bushel baskets is to begin practicing righteousness. To begin to realize that we are not on this earth to hide from others, but to serve others is to begin to practice righteousness.

And if we can do that, we will have righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, the bushel basket experts.

Share your light with others. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine. Amen.