

5th Sunday after the Epiphany

Mathew 5:13

Isaiah 58

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Set me free oh God from the bondage of sin, from the ways I separate myself from you who is my source, my foundation and my freedom

The readings this week are rich and deep. The opening collect which I rewrote as my opening prayer just now...is profound. It associates sin with bondage, not finger-wagging, bad behavior. It then contrasts this with *being in God...* which is ...freedom. Not pretend nice girl well-behaved fake freedom ...not bold MLK myth-busting world changing **Freedom**

I often find it helpful to exchange the plural "sins" with the singular word Sin as theologian Paul Tillich recommends. It clarifies something fundamental for me which I think others may misunderstand also. When we speak of our sins or sinfulness it often brings to mind ways we think (or think other people will think) we have been bad or naughty. This often involves our bodies which many people have grown up already feeling shame about, shame which may even have been instigated in the church. Here's a chilling example:

My mother was taught as a child to sleep with her arms crossed over her chest and not to move them all night long, she would keep the baby Jesus safe in her heart. This is not the message of God.

Oh God set us free from the misunderstood baggage of Christianity that we learned when we were 11 and that we still hear reinvented over and over again in various quarters with varied agendas that have nothing to do with God's dream that we have abundant life!

But how to get this message out there?? Overcoming this misunderstanding of the word SINS is still the most frequent conversation I have with adults who feel they have been hurt by or are afraid they WILL be hurt the church if they joined one. The second conversation is assuring people that I don't think God is a masculine entity, in spite of the pronouns we use. We can't keep saying the same words and expect people to understand that what we mean is different than how they heard it the first time! We need to find a way to honor our traditions and change the message.

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of sin, and give us the liberty of abundant life that is in you and in ALL of us because of you.

Here is some REALLY OLD language from the 1st reading that is VERY clear. Isaiah: personifying the voice of God

Look, Israel how you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.

This so clear. and yet I'm not sure we have the courage to really believe it. How might God be calling our norms to change?

*Look, Israel how you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.*

Who? What? does that bring to mind for you?

God in the voice of Isaiah then calls out false humility and religiosity.

*Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?*

NO

this is the fast that I choose:

*to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,*

How might each of us take this call seriously? What holds us back? Who are the oppressed in our world? Isaiah makes it clear God wants to be understood.

And then in our next reading out of the depths of Corinthians:

We hear Paul also wanting to be understood:

I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.

And then, because he is Paul, in kind of lofty words and wisdom, he explains that rather than being separated from God (just as the collect pointed out) through the spirit, we have the mind of christ!

What hubris is this!!?

But what I think Paul wants us to understand is this:

Often we make the mistake, commit that sin of separation if you will of thinking of God as fundamentally *external* to us. But as first the collect said and now Paul explains, that's not really the name of the game. We are not simply playing a game of simon says or What would Jesus do? The mind of God is already implanted in us. *It's who we are...* in our FREEDOM. This is Not something that you need a theology degree to understand but something basic and integral and intuitive and deep. It's something a child could understand.

I went to Quaker camp in Vermont from ages 9-11. Every morning we sat outside in silence in a huge circle, watching as the early light came through the trees. Sometimes someone stood up and talked about our inner light. Sometimes we sang. Sometimes we fell gently back asleep. But even at 9, I knew exactly what inner light meant because in that circle in the light in early morning in the wonder of world and in the warming of my heat..I could feel it

The mind of God is inside us like a light but as an adult who has traveled far and probably been hurt a lot, you may need to be reminded,. You may need to feel forgiven and beloved and reconciled to God in order to *feel it*.

So...what are we supposed to about this and why? How might we proclaim this saving grace and illuminate this inner light implanted in everyone, without using lofty words or wisdom???

By putting our lamp on a lampstand for the whole world to see.

I remember the first time I came across the following quote by Marianne Williamson. I was cringing in the corner of a dance studio terrified and ashamed of my lumpy body. Pressed against the door to the dressing room, wishing I could make myself invisible, I leaned over to read it pinned on the bulletin board.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. ...You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

Long before I read the Gospel, I got the message. Letting your light shine before others isn't egotism *because it isn't just your glory and it isn't just your light*. So, as an exercise in letting our light shine before others, I'd like us to consider putting some quotes on our sign out front. Send in suggestions. What words have inspired you in your walk of faith?

The readings for today thus all asked what it means to be in right relationship with God. And then gave us some very clear answers:

*Share your bread with the hungry,
Bring the homeless poor into your house
Do not to hide yourself from your own kin
And don't hide your light under a bushel*

Because in truth, the hungry, the poor, the naked, the angry, the dispossessed, the threatened, the fearful, the mentally ill *are* your own kin, they are your own family. Respond to what is hurting others *as if* it is hurting your own body, because in truth... *in the embodied reality of God...* IT IS.

and do not hide your light under a bushel basket but put it on a lamp stand. let your light shine before others

So, how might we as a religious community put our lamp on a lampstand and be more visible in this community? How might we shore up our fiscal health to insure that we can continue to be a light in this community? How might we speak faith into Main St. in words that can be understood, even just by someone passing by? How might we as a congregation lift each other up: share our strengths and vulnerabilities so that we might all be as salted and flavorful and *full of health and abundant life* as Jesus recommends? How might we grow our light in new ways and new directions by partnering with other faith communities and arts ministries in our own building and together do concerted work to overturn systems of oppression by sharing the Gospel message and the light of Christ?

In the year ahead...*how will we shine?*