

How Salty is Your Ritual  
United Church of Broomfield  
February 5, 2023

Isaiah 58:1-12 KJV-NRSVue

- 1 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.
- 2 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 want God on their side.
- 3 “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.
- 4 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.
- 5 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?
- 6 Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?
- 7 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?
- 8 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.
- 9 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,
- 10 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.

11 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.

12 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.

Matthew 5:13-20 NRSVue

13 “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. 14 “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 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.

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 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. 19 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. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

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When we hear the words from the prophet Isaiah, do they sound familiar?

- Talk of feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger and clothing the naked?

There are many Christians today who think of Judaism as a worn-out, rigid old religion that needs to be replaced. Clearly, Jesus didn't think that way and we shouldn't either. When Jesus gave the teachings that are parts of the Sermon on the Mount, he was speaking as a Jew to Jews. He apparently thought of himself as part of a vital religious tradition through which God had been at work for centuries and through which God was just about to do something new and even greater. When Jesus spoke of fulfilling the law and the prophets, he was calling all who would take him seriously to commit themselves to something really big.

The truth is that first-century Judaism was an alive and vital religion. It spread throughout the world. There were important Jewish communities in Alexandria, Antioch, Babylon, Rome, and all of the great cities of the first-century world. As word of “the way” developed, tensions and conflicts developed between these new “Christians” and Jews. But it is important for us to remember that “the way” developed within the Jewish faith.

Jesus knew that that would happen. He made it clear that he did not come to replace the law and the prophets; rather to bring the faith they taught to vital fulfillment so that people living out of this fulfilled Judaism could become God's agents for changing the world, salt of the earth, light of the world.

When Jesus said, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees," he meant to pay them a compliment. Jesus appreciated the Pharisees because they were the ones who were taking their religion seriously. And many of the Pharisees had an appreciation for Jesus. Sometimes tension developed between them. The Pharisees were most interested in retaining the integrity of their religious tradition so it would not melt away into the sophisticated Greek and Roman culture in which they lived. -- Jesus, on the other hand, was interested in recovering the vitality of the faith of a people committed to living in a covenant relationship with God. That was "the way" he was teaching.

What are we to make of that? It is important for us to ask that question, because as we read the Hebrew Scriptures, we hear them telling a story of a long and varied and often torturous history in which the Jewish people often departed from their essential faith in first one direction and then in another. There are two aspects of the Jewish heritage that Jesus was eager to recover and bring to fulfillment.

The first of these was **a commitment to being part of a unique community of people whom God called into being to serve the purposes of God**. The Jewish people knew nothing of a solitary religion. To be a Jew was to be part of a community of people whose life and history was shaped by living in a covenant relationship with the God who was committed to justice and fullness of life for all people. When God first made a covenant with Abram, the earliest ancestor of the Jewish people, he called him to venture into a new life so that God could bless him to be a blessing (Genesis 12:1-2). That gave every Jew something to live up to.

The second aspect of the Jewish faith that Jesus was eager to recover is **a commitment to the purpose of God for ALL people**. When the prophets wrote late in Israel's history, after the disaster of their defeats by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, they most often called the people to recover these aspects of their faith. Isaiah called them to be a nation that practices righteousness and does not forsake the ordinances of their God, a people who would not seek their own interest on fasting days while oppressing their workers (Isaiah 58:3), but rather, would fast as God wants by fighting injustice, feeding the hungry and housing the homeless. He reminded them: the fast God chooses is to break the bonds of injustice, in all its forms. THAT is ritual. THAT is worship. THAT is saltiness.

It is not hard to see how Jesus and the members of the early church worked at bringing about this fulfillment. In the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us **the way** of living in a life-shaping relationship with the living God that will exceed the vitality of the righteousness of the most pious Pharisees. Jesus taught his followers to go into the world and live lives that would make a difference in the world, to be the light of the world, and to be the salt of the earth.

The big question is, what are **WE** doing with the calling to be members of a unique community to serve the purpose of God? What are **WE** doing with the commission to live lives that will make a difference in the world? There is a littleness in our culture that often infiltrates our religion, specifically what we know as American Christianity, and keeps us from living up to the bigness of the faith to which Jesus calls us.

There is too much focus placed on being so individualistic that it is hard for us to remember the importance of being part of a covenant community. We don't like to believe we need anyone else to make our religion complete or that we have any responsibility to anyone else. It has become fashionable to talk about being

spiritual people but not being a part of any "organized religion." It's especially hard for those young in faith when "organized religion" doesn't reflect "the way" that Jesus taught.

*When the missionary E. Stanley Jones met Mahatma Gandhi he asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?" Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ." Why did Gandhi feel this way? It had nothing to do with theology, and everything to do with personal experience. When he was a young man practicing law in South Africa, he became attracted to the Christian faith. He studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus and began to explore becoming a Christian. One day, he decided to attend a church service. As he came up the steps of the church, a white South African church elder barred his way. "Where do you think you're going?" the man asked. Gandhi replied, "I'd like to attend worship here." The church elder snarled at him, "There's no room for [blacks] in this church. Get out of here or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps." From that moment on, Gandhi resolved to adopt what was good in Christianity, but never to become a Christian if it meant being part of a church.<sup>1</sup>*

Our culture has lost much of its sense of accountability. Idolizing individuality to the point of rejecting community, has led to a harmful way of thinking that we can do just about anything we want to do without feeling any sense of responsibility either for the cost of our actions or for the effects of our actions upon the community as a whole. It is amazing how many things we have managed to convince ourselves are okay.

There was a time that churches required anyone who would be Sunday school teachers to promise to be regular in church attendance and to abstain from the use of tobacco and alcohol so they can set a good example for the young people of the community. Few churches now have any such expectation. Many church members insist that what they do in their "private lives" is nobody's business but their own. I'm not going to suggest we return to such rules and that the privacy of our lives isn't important, because it is - but the point is whether we even consider that our words and actions, even in our private lives, **can and do** affect others – the idea of "leadership by example."

Then there is the self-centeredness of our culture. Many people have chosen to have a religious faith primarily because of the benefits they hope to gain for themselves. When people look for a church to join, they are likely to do it as if they are shopping for a new car, asking which church will give them the most bells & whistles for the lowest possible investment. Do people seek out a church that will challenge their thinking and require them to serve? "Going to church is fine, but I don't want to feel guilty in joining a ministry, in having to be at the church any day other than Sunday morning, or to have to do uncomfortable work like talking to homeless people." Few look for a church that will require them to actually think about WHY they declare themselves as Christians. Few look for a church that will give them opportunities to make their lives count in the services of the purpose of God.

So long as we are thinking in this way, we are not likely to be able to catch the vision of the bigness of the faith to which Jesus calls us. We are not likely to be responsive to the call to become a part of a unique covenant community called into existence by God for the purpose of doing God's loving work in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1925), cited in "Answering Gandhi's Rebuke of Christians and Christianity," *Big C Catholics*, July 2015, [https://bigccatholics.blogspot.com/2015/07/answering-gandhis-rebuke-of-christians\\_5.html](https://bigccatholics.blogspot.com/2015/07/answering-gandhis-rebuke-of-christians_5.html).

If we take an honest look at the world we live in, we will see that the littleness in our culture has effects that result in our being desperately in need of some who will come with a bigger vision. Our world needs those who will be salty - to give new quality to life in our world. Our world needs those who will be a light to enable people to see things as they really are and to catch a vision of the better possibility God offers. Fortunately, there are still people who catch the vision of the bigness of the calling to be God's covenant people and who give themselves to it with joyful commitment.

To be salty, to be light, we must heed the words of Isaiah and Jesus and NOT glorify RITUAL over COMMUNITY. Ritual is wonderful and beautiful – I believe God enjoys it immensely, but our attendance in church, our prayers, our singing of hymns and exhorting, “amen,” mean didly-squat if we walk out that door and reject one another and everything that God commands of us. If we are **really** followers of the way, if we are **really** believers in a God of covenant relationship, then we must demonstrate that.

Others are watching. As a covenant community of humans, we must remember to **always** show others Christ's love – at work, at school, at the club on a Friday night, at the burger joint when they've completely messed up your order, when the police officer is writing you a speeding ticket – everywhere, at all times. It's hard. Following the way is hard. Worshiping God isn't always easy things like singing hymns and saying prayers; it's more than just an occasional fast or giving up chocolate at Lent. Worshiping God is fighting oppression, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and showing compassion to the hurt.

May we all be prophetically bright and salty!

AMEN