

Sermon – “Further Clarification”

Sunday, February 9, 2014

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9a, Matthew 5:13-20

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

In our first scripture reading, Isaiah 58:1-9a, the prophet reminds us that performing religious practices without changing one's behavior toward God's ways is not enough. During the exile in Babylon, the Hebrew people developed customs of fasting since they could no longer fulfill the obligation of temple sacrifices. Here God says that fasting does no good if it does not change people's hearts. True fasting is to free those who are oppressed and feed those who are hungry, and to work to bring justice. When this happens, God's light shines in the world and the exiles will be restored. Listen now to God's word.

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 delight to draw near to God. 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 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. 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 loosen the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs 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. Amen.

Today we continue to read from the collection of Jesus' teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount in our second scripture reading found in Matthew 5:13-20. Jesus uses powerful images of salt and light as he describes what it means to live according to the ways of God's kingdom. The same images of salt and light are used in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus continues and expands this message and calls followers to go to the heart of God's law, fulfilling the spirit of it. (Seasons of the Spirit, 2011) Hear now God's word.

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 under foot. 14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 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. 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Further Clarification

The text: 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. Matthew 5:16

Let us pray, Holy and Loving God, keep us honest with ourselves and one another as we seek further clarification of what it means to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Speak to us anew and write your laws upon our hearts that we may live into your kingdom in authentic and loving ways. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As Westminster's new pastor, I can assure you there will not be a lot of football illustrations coming from the pulpit over the years. However, I read an article a few days following last week's Super Bowl competition between the Seattle Seahawks and the Denver Broncos that intrigued me.

Peter and I spent most of the evening last Sunday at the Knox home visiting with our youth and their families. The little football we did see revealed the Broncos inability to move the ball from early on. I remember being amazed at how the Seahawks were right there disrupting every Bronco play. Using one of my favorite metaphor, one might say, their defense was like "salt on a peanut."

The CBS Morning Show, which I watch daily during my exercise routine, alluded to an article written by Meghan Keheally. This is what she had to say:

The Seattle Seahawks have revealed that a good part of their defensive strategy came from the fact that they were able to decode Peyton Manning's hand signals on the field... meaning that they knew exactly what to expect for each play. If true, that would explain why the Broncos had so much trouble scoring, getting their only points on the board in the third quarter.

Manning's hand signals are known within the league for being one of his common traits on the field. Manning is said to change them every game but this time the other team was paying very close attention early on, explaining how they were able to thwart his plans in the first quarter. The other problem that plagued Manning was that he didn't switch up the system after realizing that it wasn't working....

It seems to me that Peyton Manning has revealed a couple of truths that transcend the football field. The first is simply this: In the game of life, we may each be *showing our hand* in ways we do not intend and unknowingly, we may be giving the game away. In the same way hand signals indicate the next play, our behavior reveals what is in our hearts. Isaiah and Jesus remind us of this and encourage us to live lives that are congruent with what we believe and who our God is. Religious rituals and personal piety can never replace doing what is right. This is plain and simply giving the game away.

Salt and light are two great metaphors for those who choose to follow Christ. Salt does not exist for itself but seasons and preserves that which it touches. The primary function of light is not to be seen but to let things be seen as they are...in truth. When Jesus says, *You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world*, the *you are* of these sayings is significant. The disciples are not challenged to try harder to be salt and light, but are told that as followers of Christ they *are* salt and light for the world.

Dr. George Sweazey served as Moderator of the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. in 1969 holding our denomination together during a turbulent time of growing equality in our country. Self-reflection and change is always difficult and this transition was no exception. He also served as Pastor at the Webster Groves Presbyterian Church before my time there and retired as Professor of Homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary. One of my favorite Dr. Sweazey stories was how he responded to those who said they didn't go to church because it was filled with hypocrites. He would simply smile and say, "Not to worry...there is always room for one more."

There is a little hypocrisy in each of us. One of the most difficult and yet loving gestures we can do for one another, as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, is to be honest about the inconsistencies that are a part of each of our lives and a part of our life together.

The second truth revealed by Mr. Manning is that in the game of life, when things aren't working, one needs to switch up the system and make a change. Nothing is more painful than to watch someone we love continue in a pattern that is unhealthy and destructive. As difficult as change may be, sometimes it is necessary. In the words of 20th century poet W.H. Auden:

*We would rather be ruined than changed.
We would rather die in our dread
than climb the cross of the moment.
And let our illusions die.*

One of the gifts we gave our son Paul when he graduated from high school last summer was a small Swiss Army Knife. We presented it to him during a bike trip across Missouri's Katy Trail, explaining the symbolism of each of the seven tools within the knife for a young adult preparing to shine on a life journey. We explained that:

- 1) The screwdriver suggests life is not fair and we all get "screwed" from time to time.
- 2) The nail file reminds us to "file" things away in an organized life.
- 3) The toothpick suggests the importance of good personal hygiene.
- 4) Tweezers remind us to pay particular attention to the small things in life.
- 5) The key ring suggests the key to a joyful life is faith.
- 6) The knife blade, which cuts deeply, reminds us to reach for the profound.

And the tool that took on the greatest significance as we were confronted by flood waters, which engulfed the Katy Trail and forced us to abandon our adventure on the third day.

- 7) The Scissors, which remind us to know when to cut things off. Sometimes you just have to "let it go!"

May we each find the grace and wisdom to know when to cut things off, switch up the system and make a change within our lives. May we be mindful of how we are being perceived in the game of life and may our *light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.* So be it. Amen.