

Shining through the Cracks

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

“Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly....”

“You are the light of the world.”

When the President shared his intention to “destroy the Johnson Amendment,” a provision in the tax code which prohibits all non-profit organizations from endorsing or opposing political candidates, most preachers were in the midst of exegeting the politically charged words of the prophet Isaiah that I just read to you. In essence, Isaiah is saying to returned exiles who were hunkering down in their sanctuaries to perfect the rituals of religion, “Get over yourselves and out into the streets to lose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, feed the hungry, house the homeless, and clothe the naked. Stop pointing your fingers at each other with contempt and start sharing your food and resources so that all may have what they need to live the lives given them by God to live.”

Jesus will say and do the same in his brief public ministry, before he hands the words and work of the gospel over to the church. Yet because the church has had the gospel on its hands for the long-haul, the church has spent the last two thousand years not only feeding and housing and clothing those who are in need; the church also has been compelled by the gospel to ask after the unjust ways various societies have ordered the common life, especially in those times when an unconscionable number of people dwell in abject poverty while a precious few are rich beyond measure. But fingers begin to wag whenever the church gets specific about changing the systems that might be creating the conditions for hunger and homelessness and mass incarceration and refugees. In our best moments, we say that we simply differ in the way we think this society should be ordered so that all may flourish. In our less than stellar moments, we are not so charitable toward those with whom we differ.

What to do? There is the “separation of church and state” option invoked by partisans of every stripe who presume the church’s proper place in society is as an institution that does just what Israel was doing when Third Isaiah roared onto the scene: we should hunker down in our sanctuaries and perfect the practice of religious rituals while staying out of the public square. Charity is fine, but anything more is meddling. The church’s business is vertical, having to do with an individual’s relationship to God and horizontal only in so far as the church preserves the status quo of faith and family. The returned exiles were doing just that: adhering to a strict observance of the law and doubling down on the prohibition against intermarriage (6th century B.C.’s version of gay marriage). I just have to say that when Isaiah 58 is before you, this understanding of the separation of church and state is a hard position to maintain, even though, in the face of our ongoing political divisions, the gospel in Isaiah’s words may be hard to hear.

But hear I did this week, though not as I set out to hear. Thanks to the anthem’s text that I had completely missed in my reading of Isaiah and the words of a young woman who preached on Jesus’ words from Matthew before the presbytery this last Tuesday, I found myself paying attention to the light: the light rising in the darkness in Isaiah and the light of the world that we are in Matthew. No doubt I was personally longing for a little light. The week had begun with a text from members, friends of twenty years, who were thinking of leaving because the partisan divide in this congregation was beginning to feel pretty personal. Something in me cracked when I read their text and opened me to the word I heard the next day in Presbytery, a word reminding me that when Jesus said “You are the light of the world,” he was talking with people who were hurting. Leah Miller said, as if speaking to me, that being light is not something that we do, it is something that we are: cracked and broken people, forgiven and redeemed for the glory of God. She said that Christ’s light shines through the cracks of our broken lives and the cracks of the broken body of Christ that is his church for the sake of the world.

It occurred to me that Isaiah was trying to pry open an ancient crack in Israel’s life that was necessary if Israel were ever to be a light to the nations. The crack was their exile and slavery in Egypt. God said as they were about to enter the land, “Do not oppress a stranger, for *you know what it feels like* to be stranger, for you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt.” Rabbi Jonathan Sachs hears in God’s command the “radical idea that care for the stranger is why the Israelites had to experience exile and slavery before they enter the Promised Land and build their own society and state. You will not succeed in caring for the stranger, God implies, until you yourselves know in your very bones and sinews what it feels like to be a stranger....Those who forget what it feels like to be a stranger,” Sachs adds, “eventually come to oppress strangers, and if the children of Abraham oppress strangers, why,” God asks, “did

I make them my covenantal partners?" They, of course, did forget; then they forgot again; and now it is as though their forgetting magnifies the fear of the stranger on every side of a multitude of divides in the Middle East.

I think you also could say, in spite of our beginnings, that the experience of being a stranger is something we are better at forgetting than remembering! I have wondered so many times since 9/11 what might have been different had we paid attention to the biblical narrative and the words of the prophets in those days, asking ourselves how God might be using our wounded psyches and our enormous grief to the end that we might remember what it feels like to be vulnerable, as the rest of the world is vulnerable. What if what the terrorists intended for evil, God was trying to use for our good and we were willfully blind to the light shining through the chasm? To borrow Rabbi Sachs words, "The people of the covenant [must] be strangers at home, so that they are able to make strangers feel at home. Only thus can they defeat the most powerful of all drives to evil: the sense of being threatened by the Other, the one not like me."

I only know enough, these days, to pay attention to the cracks in our common life, trusting that God is doing God's best to use them as openings for the light of the world to shine in the darkness. I think of the synagogue to whom we wrote last Sunday after rocks had broken their windows, "shattering the glass as well as [their] sense of security." In a public letter to the anonymous person throwing the rocks, Rabbi Robyn Frisch wrote, "Your acts of evil have resulted in more acts of kindness than I can count. And I know that even if you throw more rocks...the overwhelming generosity and support we've received from so many people will continue to inspire me and others to work toward creating a tolerant and safe society where people of all faiths can live and worship in security and peace." Light shining through the cracks!

"You are the light of the world," Jesus says to the disciples and the hurting crowd. I am thinking now not corporately about this light but about the light imparted to each of us by him and imparted to all of us gathered as his church. "God does his work with that which is broken," a mother wrote in the wake of her son's murder. "...it is when our hearts are broken that God sculpts our souls, prodding open the narrow entrances to the caves of our being." Put another way, the light that dwells in us cannot be the light of the world until it makes a way in us, often through pain, that open us to our common humanity.

Martin Luther spoke of this light as "the indwelling Christ, mediated by practices of the Christian community, [that] transform the faithful toward the manner of life that actively loves [the] neighbor." Notice that Luther is speaking of religious practices that send us into the world rather than separating us from the world. As those who are "the abode of a broken and suffering God," one practice is simply being with the suffering, as we all are suffering. This is difficult, Henri Nouwen writes, "because it asks of us that we share in the other's vulnerability, enter with him or her into the experience of weakness and powerlessness, become part of uncertainty, and give up control and self-determination...[Yet in this way,] a Christian community [becomes] a healing community," Nouwen wrote in the turbulent 60's, "not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings and occasions for" Christ's light to shine.

Another practice, according to Luther, is the Eucharist and the *communio* created by it. "The sacrament has no blessing and significance," Luther insisted, "unless love grows daily and *so* changes a person that [the person] is made one with all others." Around the table, "Christ is declared and given to all believers, just as [we] are, with all that [we] are: works, sufferings, services, graces, possessions! Nothing is left out....The celebration of the sacrament is the celebration of the miracle of authentic *transubstantiation*, 'which means...'through love being changed into each other.'"

Meaning taking on the life of the other; assuming the burdens of the other; standing in the place of the shame of the other; accepting the utter difference of the other as one's own. Whether the other be poor or rich, male or female, leaping or lame, sighted or blind, gay or straight, broken in body or healthy, black or white, free or imprisoned, old or young, citizen or alien, in Christ we are being changed into the other whom we might otherwise never know or notice: the one we have learned to turn our backs upon, often in Christ's name. Therefore, says Calvin, "it is impossible for us to wound, despise, reject, injure or in any way offend one of our [brothers or sisters], but we, at the same time, wound, despise, reject, injure and offend Christ in him [or in her]." The indwelling Christ in the other.

Now I am ready to hear: "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," Isaiah said. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine." May God's light shine through the cracks in our broken hearts; may Christ's light shine through the cracks of his body, the church, so that we might be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in. Thanks be to God.