

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA

The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge

Church Year A

2/5/17

Epiphany 5

Isaiah 58:1-12, 1 Corinthians 2:1-16, Matthew 5:13-20

Well, here we are again, a collection of fools gathered together in this community of fools. And here I am, speaking to you as one fool to another. Now if you didn't hear last Sunday's sermon, you may be scratching your head – or maybe even bristling a little bit – and saying to yourself, “Who is he calling a fool? Certainly not me!” Well, yes, you!! If you're here today or within the sound of my voice, you are a fool – or at least an aspiring fool. A wannabe fool. We are all gathered here under the ultimate sign and symbol of foolishness – this beautiful Christus Rex – the fool hanging from that cross – That sign and symbol of what the Apostle Paul called “God's foolishness.” The sign and symbol of how God takes what we break – how God takes what human beings despise – how God takes what human beings consider to be weak and contemptible – and God takes what we want to throw away and raises it up in power and might and glory.

We fools are here today because we know that this cross, this symbol of Christ crucified, is the perfect metaphor for bringing together of over divided and pain – filled world. And this sign to us that God's foolishness is a sign for us that God is in the middle of all the mess and the pain and the sadness of this divided and broken world. God isn't off in some distant imaginary place called Heaven. God is right here in the muck and the slop, right beside all us fools.

But you know what? Even as we make our way through the muck and the slop – and it sure feels pretty sloppy out there these days – we hear this morning that we are here for a purpose. We are here to be salt and light.

This morning's gospel reading comes at the conclusion of the Beatitudes that we read last Sunday. Jesus has gathered his friends on a hill – on a mount – and he begins to speak to them by describing what it means to live in a state of blessedness.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

“Blessed are the meek - the humble – for they shall inherit the earth.”

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”.

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.”

These Beatitudes, it needs to be said, are not prescriptive. They're not Law like the Ten Commandments. Jesus isn't telling of what to **do**. These beatitudes are **descriptive**. They

describe a state of blessedness. They describe what it's like to live – right now in this very moment – in the Kingdom of Heaven.

And how do we live into this state of blessedness? It's not complicated. The Prophet Micah in fact put it very simply. We read it last week, we fellow fools. And you might say it was Jesus mission statement. Micah said, "But what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God."

Want to live in a state of blessedness? Here's what you do.

Stand up, speak out, act for justice. And do it with a kind and merciful heart. Not with an angry, judgmental, "my way or the highway" heart. And above all, walk humbly before God. Seeking God's guidance and God's will in everything. Knowing you don't have all the answers, and knowing you won't have all the answers. But always, always, working to know God's will – God's justice – and then do it.

Hey, I know I said that last Sunday and I do try not quote myself too often. But this once I thought it was worth saying again. To remind us of our mission statement too. If we think of Jesus as the pattern for our lives – and I do believe that's at the core of what it means to call Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior – if we really mean that – then we'd better **follow** the pattern of his life – and so we better get to work. We better get salty, if you know what I mean. What does salt do for food, after all? It brings out the flavor. It heightens and sharpens. Food that's well salted – appropriately salted – sparkles. It's not dull.

My dear sisters and brothers, standing up and speaking out and acting for God's justice – and doing it with kindness and mercy and humility – not in an angry, finger-pointing, sort of way – brings purpose and meaning – it brings flavor – It brings sparkle to life.

So say your prayers and then get salty. Pray for God's will for you to be known and then go and do something about it. Get salty. And when you do that, you know what? Your light will shine. Your light will shine before others and that will give glory to God. Crucial distinction I want us to notice here. Letting our light shine isn't about our own personal glory. It's not about gratifying our egoic desire to be noticed or important. It's all about glorifying God.

That's sure what we hear another prophet, Isaiah, telling us this morning. He's talking to the people of Jerusalem who are pretty satisfied that their religious practices, their pious fasting and their showy ritual is pleasing to God – it's sure pleasing to them.

Nonsense, the prophet says. Here's the kind of fast the Lord is really interested in.

"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 now to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless 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.” So let your light break forth, Isaiah says. Let your light shine before others, Jesus says.

Here’s your right religious practice! Doing justice. Feeding the hungry. Housing the homeless. Clothing the ones who are cold and freezing. That’s letting your light shine. You see where Jesus gets it? From the prophet Isaiah. Letting your light shine before others glorifies God and it’s the beginning of your own healing.

And the key is to do all of that with kindness and mercy and humility, Isaiah says:

“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 so counter to all the anger and bitterness of this age. So counter to our impulse to divide ourselves into warrior tribes. And then point our fingers at each other across the walls we create to separate us from those who don’t look like us and think like us. But when we’re pointing our fingers at someone else in all our judgement and self-righteousness, we’re really pointing away from our own brokenness, our own inner divisions, our own hardness of heart. It’s not over there, it’s here! Before you point to “over there,” look “here” first.

And the way out of that bind is simple. Feed the hungry. Shelter the homeless. Welcome the stranger, stand up and speak out for God’s justice with kindness and mercy and humility. Your light will rise. Your needs will be satisfied in the parched places. Your bones will be strong. You’ll be like a watered garden. Sounds like heaven to me. And Isaiah and Jesus are telling us, it’s right here.

So there’s that symbol of foolishness, the fool hanging on the cross. Calling us, his fellow fools, to get moving. Calling us to get salty. Don’t be shy. Don’t be timid. Let your light shine. Not for your sake, but for God’s sake, let your light shine for the sake of the world. Amen