

Making The World Taste Good – Judy Cox

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112:1-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

Such an odd time, this church season... here between the pairings of Advent and Christmas, and Lent and Easter, it sometimes feels like just a placeholder. But it's more than that!

“The word **epiphany** comes from the Greek ... meaning ‘appearance,’” explains Joseph P. Russell. “Rulers appeared upon their palace balcony to reveal their presence to the people, ... ‘made an epiphany’ before [them] ... Using the palace balcony as a metaphor, God in Jesus made an appearance (epiphany) on the world’s balcony.” And, he concludes, “WE are to stand on the balcony of our own time and reveal the presence of God through our lives.” Jesus says this with other metaphors: *You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

Elizabeth challenged us last Sunday so to live as to “get on God’s guest list.” This week we hear the call on “God’s guests” to reveal God’s faithfulness, and love, and bring God glory in how we live—so others want in on that guest list! Our texts today show us too many ways, too familiar ways, that God’s people dodge this call, and miss this vocation.

Today’s passage from Matthew seems to take an abrupt turn partway through. How does the last bit even connect with the first, *salt* and *light* with *the Law and the Prophets*? Reading seminary professor Edwin van Driel enlightened me profoundly. We can overlook, he warns, the political context of Jesus’ original audience. Israel’s vocation, to reveal Who their God is through their life and witness to and in the world, was being forgotten in the immediacy of their suffering under Roman rule. This brutal occupation splintered Israel into factions with different strong reactions, all of which diverted them from their vocation. The Sadducees opted to make nice, compromise, and collaborate with the Romans. The Zealots advocated violent resistance to the point of death. What about the Pharisees, scrupulously Law-observing? Here Jesus calls them out, confusingly, along with the scribes, for “righteousness” inadequate to *enter the kingdom of heaven*. These Pharisees were split in their response to Roman rule; some supported resistance like the Zealots. Most, however, had another strategy, the polar opposite of Israel’s vocation: withdrawal. They chose to retreat into a ghetto, a bubble, rather than engage with their world. As Rev. Dr. Van Driel puts it, they “steered toward deeper private study and practice of Torah ... [to] preserve [their] cultural and religious identity ... until ... the eschatological coming of God’s reign.” (We recognize that impulse: let’s “hunker in the bunker” until God shows up to fix things.) So verses 17-20 very explicitly rebuke that position; we miss this, but the original audience would also have heard it behind verses 13-16. Jesus tells his disciples, as the crowds listen in, that the Pharisees have it wrong! To be metaphorical *salt of the earth*, to be Israel, they must engage in the world to “season” and “flavor” it (note his emphasis on salt’s taste). As the *light of the world*, they must shine visibly, not hide themselves away from others. Their *light* is to *shine before others*, so that their *good works* are seen, and glory is given to the Father.

That’s why Jesus so energetically insists he’s fulfilling, not abolishing, the Law and the Prophets. They call Israel, over and over, to engage in the world, visibly, to show Who God is—

to the vocation of serving as God's window display, if you will, drawing in by its compelling beauty the watching, nose-pressed-to-the-glass, nations. As N.T. Wright tells us, that vocation, to be faithful Israel, Jesus accepted; Jesus recruits us to that vocation, just as he did the original disciples.

To which we say, "Ouch!" American evangelicalism tends to hide in that bunker alongside the Pharisees, doesn't it? What about us, St. Paul's? Is there any way in which we might be living in a ghetto, a bubble? ...

In today's Isaiah passage the covenant community is back in Israel, unsure how to BE as that community. When the Persians conquered Babylon, Babylonian captives were allowed to return home—so, back in their homeland, they're under Persian rule as a vassal state. How then are these Jews to live, to relate to one another, back home? Does it make any difference, since they have obviously already been saved, restored, returned home? YES, it matters! Again, God's people are to live in a way that shines God's light, that reinforces what they say about God, so that their testimony, their witness, will be heard! This is the vocation of Israel, God's window display to and for the world.

While exiled in Babylon the Jews have reflected over their past, how much they as a people failed to obey God. Confessing that their nation went into exile for communal disobedience, they have repented. Zechariah tells us that while in Babylon they've added FOUR new fast days, on the anniversary of key events in the destruction of Jerusalem. God delivers them, and brings them home through that Persian "return policy." Full of determination to love and follow God, they focus on "doing it right" this time. But while living as captives in a foreign culture, they seem to have forgotten the importance of how they live together as God's people! Apparently they are retreating into a privatized, personalized, individualized piety, disconnected from how they live.

Fasting, the pious practice of giving up food (or something else valued), asks God's help in a special way. According to Isaiah, other unfaithfulness keeps this fasting from being accepted. Do the people of God really not know that, despite behaving piously, they aren't practicing righteousness, relating rightly to others? Are they cluelessly focusing on personal piety alone? Or do they know, but avoid admitting, the disconnect between what they say and what they do? That's what the prophet seems to charge. They deliberately compartmentalize their lives to keep private, personal religion and "real life" completely separate.

What about us, St. Paul's? Do we retreat into personal, privatized, individualized piety? Might we compartmentalize our lives, whether we admit it or not, keeping personal piety and "real life" separate?

God is not a vending machine. Religious practices like the self-denial of fasting aren't a "quid pro quo," putting God under obligation. "Really," God seems to say, "So now you think I'm compelled to help you?" There are more weighty and dangerous means of self-indulgence than food—specifically, Isaiah says, careless, self-indulgent mistreatment of others. Such destructive self-centeredness exposes the superficiality of any repentance the fasting might show. God isn't fooled!

True fasting, the fast God chooses, compels God's people to give up self-centeredly mistreating others. God requires we give THAT up, not food! Isaiah 58:6 shows the true fast reversing mistreatment: *[loosing] the bonds of injustice, [undoing] the thongs of the yoke, [letting] the oppressed go free, [breaking] every yoke.*

How did these Israelites self-centeredly mistreat others, keeping others in bonds of injustice, captive, under a yoke? In the Torah's Holiness Code God had directed how the people were to relate to each other. Key themes are reflected in today's psalm, too: *deal generously and lend ... [distribute] freely ... [give] to the poor.*

All were to share in God's ultimate gift of the land, which was always to stay in the family. If forced to borrow (money or grain), no interest should be charged, and anything remaining on the loan was to be forgiven every 7th—or "Sabbath"—year. If the desperate sold their land for money to live on, they actually leased it, as the land was to go back to the family every 7th "Sabbath" year (the perfect 7 x 7), called the Year of Jubilee. When bankrupt, debtors could also sell themselves—that is, sell their work or their family members' work—for a certain amount of time to pay off their debt. These "indentured servants" were also to be released every Sabbath year.

But God's people weren't complying. They were keeping their neighbors like slaves long-term, instead of temporarily. They treated their neighbors like objects to "get ahead," to get the work done cheaply, instead of as neighbors, friends and equals. The people of God, returned from captivity, were themselves keeping others as slaves and captives. You can imagine their argument, "But they still owe me! They went and ate the borrowed grain, instead of planting it, so of course it's gone now! Why does obeying God mean I must forgive loans and set these incompetent people free every 7 years? That's not the way it's done by the Babylonians and Persians! Yes, of course I charged them interest—20, 33, 40%, the going rate in Babylon. Hey, this is the real world, you know! It's not fair for God to require that of us, not realistic! Why do I have to bear all the load of us being a holy people?" And so they decide to obey God only to a certain extent, "realistically," instead of attending to God's laws that specified how to treat others.

But that was 2500 years ago—we don't choose how we do and don't want to obey God, do we?

As our text implies, and we well know, "oppression" can happen through any power differential, whether with our employees, or coworkers with less seniority, or younger students at school, or little brothers and sisters... you get the picture. We might vent our anger on them. Or put them down, using words or attitudes to disrespect or ignore them. Or ... pay them as little as we can get away with? Make them do the undesirable, gross chores (farm work?!?), or work in unsafe conditions?

God has expectations that require action and engagement of God's people. *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?* God requires more than for the wealthiest to forgive debt. All are to share: food with the hungry, even to opening or providing homes for the homeless poor—literally, the "wanderers" (or immigrants???). Provide food, and

shelter, and clothing to those in need. Go without because you're sharing with someone else! THAT's real self-denial, a difficult giving up, that God calls a true fast! God's people are to obediently make a difference specifically AND structurally, attending to both the individuals in bondage and the systems that trap them.

What will the outcome be? *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.*

We too are the people of God, called to remember, and return, and obey. We too stand in ruins that need rebuilding. We too see breaches, and gaps, where there should be a solid connection. We are not Jews, called to observe Sabbath years of debt forgiveness every 7 years, or share family land within every tribe. What obedience are we called to? What obedience am I called to?

In this Black History month we remember and lament the heartbreaking truth that most slaveholders in our country were Christ-naming churchgoers. Last June H.R. 40, a bill to establish a commission developing proposals for reparations, came before Congress. Bishop Eugene Taylor Sutton testified in support: "Everyone living in our great nation has inherited a mess created by ... slavery. None of us caused this brokenness, but all of us have a moral responsibility to fix it." Do we, naming Christ, have the courage, and yes, the self-denial, to join even non-Christian conservatives in agreeing, acknowledging the need for reparations to descendants of those slaves (and Native Americans)ⁱ? Or do we start muttering here about "the real world ... it's not fair, not realistic ... why do I have to bear all the load..."? We confess, and lament, but do we engage to change those systems and structures? Are we able to name this as a *breach* needing our repair work? Or do we protest our helplessness to change it?

Some more examples of "repair work" St. Paul's is already up to, and how we might mend these breaches both structurally and specifically: continuing our St. Paul's support of our local food pantry, we might also join with groups like Bread For The World to lobby for increased Congressional funding for anti-hunger programs. On the other hand, keeping up our substantial communal giving to serve local at-risk children, and human trafficking survivors, we might join that with the personal engagement of volunteering our time.

Maybe you've heard the ad this week for "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" at the Fox? In the background plays its hit song, "The Candyman Can"—of course that peppy little tune is stuck in my head now! Sitting with these Scripture texts, I realize how much the ending of that silly chorus relates; this "candyman" can better the world in oh so many fabulous ways because he "mixes it with love and makes the world taste good." Church, we ARE salt and light—let's BE it! This season in particular, may those lyrics be stuck in all our heads, as we obey God's call to make the world taste good.

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/07/opinion/case-for-reparations.html>