

Sunday, February 5, 2023

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

Isaiah 58.1-9a; 1 Corinthians 2.1-12; Matthew 5.13-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/3286692571582450>

(Sermon begins at about 17:05)

“Is Not This the Fast I Choose”

Today, following this worship service, we will have our parish’s Annual Meeting. Now some may think, “ugh, another meeting, with reports and voting and parliamentary procedures. How boring.” But Annual Meetings should not be boring events that we only do because the Diocese and our Parish Bylaws require them. True, there are some legal requirements that such meetings fulfill. But in reality, the only things that are required of Annual Meetings is that we elect new Vestry members and that we elect delegates to our annual Diocesan Convention. Actions that can be accomplished in a matter of minutes. All the other stuff we do at our Annual Meeting is extra. So why do we do it? Because aside from fulfilling legal requirements, the Annual Meeting is first and foremost a celebration of who we are as St. Gregory’s parish—of our common life and our ministries, and how that reflects who we are as the Body of Christ.

As we prepare for our Annual Meeting, it is worth reflecting on our Scripture readings for today—all of which have something to say about what it means to worship God and to do ministry in his name. Specifically, the connection between worship and ministry, which are central to our identity as God’s beloveds.

Our first reading from the Prophet Isaiah delivers an oracle to the Jewish community in exile on the subject of worship. Here, God makes a sharp and rather scathing distinction between what he considers true worship and false worship. He starts off criticizing the postexilic community for engaging in ritual worship practices such as fasting and offering of sacrifices, while “forsak[ing] the ordinances of their God.” Condemnation that their worship practices are inconsistent with the way they live their lives. That God rejects such worship practices which seek to praise God’s love and compassion, while the people continue to engage in acts of oppression of others—not very loving or compassionate. What they are doing in their temples and their synagogues is not true worship in the eyes of God.

God goes on define what he considers to be true worship: “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 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?” That true worship of God entails fighting injustice; freeing those who are imprisoned or in bondage, whatever form that may take; feeding the hungry; housing the homeless; clothing the naked; and engaging in acts of hospitality. This is what it truly means to worship God. And when they figure that out, when they start changing their perspective about what it truly means to worship, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.” Then you will truly reveal the glory of the Lord.

Fast forward about 600 years to our Epistle reading. Here Paul addresses the fledgling church in Corinth, which is struggling with trying to figure out what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus. Paul writes, “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.” He then goes on to explain “my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.” Essentially saying that mere words are not adequate to convey the love of God. That the best way to truly share God’s love is, as he says, “with a demonstration of the Spirit.” That the power of God working within the believer must be shared through actions. That these actions are what reveal God’s love, are what manifests God’s love. He further expounds on what this means when he says, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.” That in our lives of faith, we come to recognize that God has given each of us unique gifts and talents to be used in his service. And that the Spirit of God works within each of us, energizing us, prompting us to use our own unique gifts and talents given by God for his purposes, in his service.

And then in our Gospel reading from Matthew, we have the continuation of the Sermon on the Mount. Today, Jesus begins to move into more practical instruction about what it means to live as God calls us to. Part of which is how the followers of Jesus minister to those who are of greatest concern to God—to those who he identified as being blessed (in last week’s portion of the Gospel). In what we hear today, he uses two specific images to convey this. The first is “You are the salt of the earth.” As we all know, with respect to foods, salt has two main purposes. One is to enhance the flavor of food, and the other is to help preserve food. Jesus then goes on to talk about how when salt loses these properties, these abilities, it is of no use. In saying that we are the salt of the earth, he is saying that our purpose is to help preserve and enhance the lives of those who are of particular concern to God: those who are poor and marginalized.

The second image Jesus uses is “You are the light of the world.” He then talks about how to be of any use, light needs to be allowed to shine and not be hidden. He goes on to say, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” That it is our works, our actions, that are the light that reveals God’s love and God’s glory to the world. In the overall context of the Sermon on the Mount, here again, the implication is that our good works in service to those who are of particular concern to God—those who are poor and marginalized—are the primary means of showing our love for and devotion to God.

Our readings for today clearly show us that what we are called to do as children of God and as followers of Jesus Christ. How we live into that calling, is primarily through the ministries that we engage in. Those ministries are our true worship. Not to diminish our worship services. What we do here on Sundays by way of worship is important. It is the coming together of the faithful to celebrate God’s love working in our lives and exploring how to share that love in the world. Our Sunday worship is a means of preparing us for the true worship that God calls us to do. Our true worship happens the other six days of the week when we are engaged in our day-to-day lives. Being the Body of Christ in the world. Using our time, our resources, our gifts and talents to help others live into the fullness of who God created them to be, to help heal the

hurts of the world, to help bring the Kingdom of God one step closer to fulfillment, and most importantly, to shine forth God's love in the world. That is what we really celebrate in our coming together for worship, and even for our Annual Meeting.