

5th Sunday of Epiphany
Sermon 2.5.23

Isaiah 58:1-12

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. ²Yet 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. ⁴Look, 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. ⁵Is 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? ⁶Is 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? ⁷Is 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? ⁸Then 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. ⁹Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰if 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. ¹¹The 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. ¹²Your 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.

Matthew 5:13-20

"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. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹Therefore, 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. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (653)

The God of the Bible is no friend of religion. It's funny to me when people seem to assume God would be, which is something I hear in small ways from time to time.

The other day, at the dentist, with a new hygienist. She asked me, "What do you do?" and I said, "I'm a pastor," and she said, "That's good. The world needs more of that," and I thought, "Really?" I'd have thought she'd have poked at that prospect a little more. I'd have hoped, anyway,

that, at least as much as she was poking at my teeth, she'd have poked at my pastoral practice, my religiosity. See if I was taking good care. See if I was actually doing anything good.

But how do you test the hygiene of a religious practice? How do you critique religion?

The people who do it from the outside seem just to argue against straw men. See Sam Harris. See Christopher Hedges. They think they're so smart. They think they're the great minds who will finally bring an end to all this persistent nonsense. For millennia such nonsense has clung on. Talk of gods and monsters. Talk of sacrifice and righteousness. Talk of eternity and life free of death. And now, finally, some smart men have come along to bring us all to our senses.

Of course, they've spent no time at all with any of the heavy hitters of actual tradition. Some of ours? Paul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther and John Calvin, Karl Barth and Flannery O'Connor and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr., Cornell West and Terry Eagleton and David Bentley Hart and Marilyn Robinson. I could give them a syllabus. But why waste my time?

Meanwhile, the people who do it from the inside are often far too permissive or come across as partisans. Us mainliners castigate the evangelical wing, while evangelicals have made a boogeyman of the liberal church that has long since reflected any sort of reality. Then there's the ecumenical movement of mid-20th-century, which largely declawed any actual criticism in favor of setting aside the habit of conflict. "Let's all just try and get along." A worthy enough aim.

Cultural criticism: every few years, there's something published—an article, a book—around the question of criticism and the role of critics. There comes the accusation: critics are just parasites, they're just people living off other people's creative or cultural output. Really, a critic is just "a failed artist, unloading long-simmering, envious resentments on those who had the luck, talent, or discipline to succeed."

That's critic A.O. Scott writing in *The Guardian* a few years ago. Setting up his book in defense of criticism, he writes on: "This assumption is so widespread as to amount to an article of public faith. Every working critic could easily assemble, from discarded letters and deleted emails, a suite of variations on the themes of 'You're just jealous' and 'I'd like to see you do better.'"

The book he was about to release into the world, *Better Living Through Criticism*, ironically suffered some withering criticism. The problem: he didn't say much that was critical enough. He was entirely too permissive of cultural output. To the question, "Is it good?" his answer was always too much, "Yes and no."

So said one critic anyway.

Because the role of the critic is to help us remember what is good, both what things achieve the quality of the good and that there is such a thing as “good.” That there’s a standard there, by which we can measure things. Just as a measuring stick is a standard for ascertaining height or length, just as a scale is a standard for ascertaining the true weight and therefore value of anything to be bought or sold, a critic holds that standard for measuring, is this a good movie or a bad one, is this a good pop song or a bad one, is this a good restaurant or a bad one?

And we’re free, of course, to enjoy the things that measure out to be bad, bad examples of their form. I’ve been known to enjoy some bad music. I’ve fallen in with some bad tv shows, watched them straight through before coming out the other side and realizing, “I think that was bad,” while realizing also, “Eh, I enjoyed myself,” for it having hit at just the right moment in my life. (“Smallville” anyone?)

A weekly podcast I listen to is Slate’s Culture Gabfest. It features three very smart, very educated critics engaging cultural output high, low, and middle. From what I can tell they all have Ph.D.’s or are just a defended dissertation short of a Ph.D. Each week, they talk together about three pieces of cultural output—movies, books, music, art, museums, media. At the end of the shared conversation, each critic “endorses” something they’ve personally been enjoying, or they happened into and came to appreciate.

One week several years ago, one of them happened into the Blessing of the Animals service at St. John the Divine in New York—and she loved it. She loved it for herself and for her young daughter whom she had in tow. She praised the sweet spectacle of it, and the awesome strange coincidence of a camel in a cathedral, and the like. She could see it for all its natural-cultural-intersectional beauty and significance. But she had nothing to say of it as an act of theology or a matter of religious liturgy. Yet that’s what it most fundamentally is. This was a religious act, a religious enactment, of which she could say nothing because her education stops just short of religious cultural output.

It’s an enormous impoverishment! Yet nearly no one ever recognizes it as such because the smart people hate religion, and the religious people hate critical intelligence. (Or is that overstating it?)

Meanwhile, God, for his part, hates both.

And God, of course, loves both, the God whom we meet in the Bible, the God who is love and whom we meet in Jesus and who Jesus speaks to invoke. The Sermon on the Mount is a speech-act: Jesus speaks into being the kingdom of God. And here we are with him, as he’s just

begun his Sermon on the Mount, this speech-act that's to be as radically creative and evocative as when, in the beginning, God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

"You are salt of the earth," this essential mineral, this thing without which there can be no life and without which also life is dull and merely about survival. Early civilizations that thrived were all ones that had reliable sources of salt. This is to speak into being the Church as such essentially elemental stuff.

"You are the light of the world," this essential thing, light, which the followers of Christ were to be, gathering as the church so to enact God's reign in the world, this thing that will never be irrelevant or unnecessary, this thing that will never be rightly abolished but must be fulfilled if we're to have any hope at all.

Matthew's gospel is the only one that speaks of the Church, the *ekklesia*, the gathering or assembly. His is the only one that remembers Jesus as having developed this purpose in the world, to gather the church, an organization, a public and recognizable witness that trains its aim on enacting the kingdom with its law of love and its ordinances for living it out. Mark's Jesus was the presence of the kingdom of God. Luke's Jesus was a conduit of the Holy Spirit. Matthew's Jesus is come to organize a formal entity: the Church, the Church in the world, a public presence which people can see and recognize and join up with and find a place among and within to enter or enact God's loving will.

But does that mean everyone everywhere that claims the name "Church" is doing that?

Who's to say?

Really, who's got the authority and perspective to say?

The problem goes way back—to time even before the prophets, though the prophets: they made it an artform. Like Isaiah.

The people were free to reoccupy the land. Babylon had fallen to Persia, and the Persian king decided the Hebrews could go home. To the land between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan: they could rebuild their society. They could rebuild their city, their Temple; they could resume their practices of remembrance and sacrifice, and to the point of it all: justice for the people, this nation a light to all the nations.

The question was: would they? Because, turns out, it's hard to live by a law of love. It's hard to live by a law whose standard is love, whose demanding practice is self-binding, self-giving service for the sake of the other, the orphan, the widow, the stranger in your midst. It's so much easier to live by a law of brute force or even of detailed regulatory measures, religiously spelled out to its

finest points of if...then... Every contingency anticipated and fore-addressed. Life together as computer- programmed and then meticulously policed.

Love, though? That requires wisdom. That requires shared trust and intimate engagement and nuance and empathy and courage and mutual accountability and forgiveness. Lots of forgiveness.

Meanwhile, the Lord had had it with the people and their chosenness. The fact of their being chosen superseded in their minds the purpose to which they'd been chosen to be put. They were chosen *for* something, right? But they'd come simply to understand it all as chosen, special. But no, this was a special status for a pressing imperative: justice, righteousness, peace in the land and even beyond.

Exceptionalism isn't an absolute status, it's a status relative to the end to which such exceptionalism is to be put. Justice. Righteousness. Love.

Day after day, the people professed their desire to know the Lord. They would fast as if to clean themselves of all but God's will. They would wear rough clothes and throw themselves into slavish postures as if this appearing to amount to nothing *actually* amounted to anything.

But, no, for the fast that the Lord desired was to loose the bonds injustice and to let the exploited and oppressed live free. This wasn't about the most exacting and perfect performance of a commanded ritual, but about ritual commanded so to change hearts—change them to yearn for justice which then transforms ways of living to bend toward justice, to work tirelessly to live out compassion and to build up the beloved community.

Then, and only then, would the people's light break forth like the dawn—when life in their midst was good for all, when life for all of creation was demonstrably and mutually abounding. Then, and only then, would the ancient ruins of their blessed nation be rebuilt so to be reinhabited by actual life, true life.

The proof of the pudding would be in the eating.

For what it's worth, I take a critical eye to my practice and to our practice together. I nearly every day measure with what standards I regard as authoritative—scripture, serious theology, rigorous prayer, professional development as outlined by our religious denomination—to see whether I am measuring up and we are measuring up.

And no one can do everything. No *one* person or congregation can do everything there is to be done so to fully to enact the reign of God. But each person and each congregation have an essential part to play in building up the whole, the entirety.

Meanwhile, the creation cries out. For justice, for peace-making, for a true witness as to what is good and what is not. The creation simply cries out, while so much of what claims to be church falls woefully short.

We are, many of us who claim to be church, woefully unserious, tragically parochial for being but self-protecting.

I guess I just want you to know that. God isn't obligated to love our attempts. God isn't duty-bound to approve of our pieties. Quite the contrary, the God of whom the prophets spoke, the God whom Jesus communed with and manifest: this is a God who's got standards.

The challenge is those standards are love: shifting, moving, ever-going-before-us love.

The good news is these standards are love: forgiving, renewing, calling-to-us-from-a perfect-end love.

So, let's see how we do.

Thanks be to God.