

Pastor Daniel Waldschmidt – February 5th and 6th, 2017

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn.” Isaiah 58:5-9

Throughout Epiphany we have seen that Christ shines in the darkness. Today we see that Christ wants to shine his light *through us*. Today in our gospel Jesus says: **“You are the light of the world. ... Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14, 16).** Today God says to us in his word: **Let your light shine by helping those in need.**

In the verses just before our Isaiah passage the people were complaining against God. They were complaining that they had been fasting to show their devotion to God, but God had not noticed it. In the verses just before our passage it says: **“Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it?’” (Isaiah 58:3)** Well, God immediately tells them why he had not accepted their fasting: **“On the day of your fasting ... you exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.” (Isaiah 58:3-4).** Fasting was meant to be an outward symbol that they were sorry for their sins. But if they were doing those sins on the very day they were fasting, then the outward symbol doesn’t mean anything. They were doing the outward symbol. Our text says that they were **“bowing their head like a reed and lying in sackcloth and ashes.” (Isaiah 58:5)** They were doing the symbol of being sorry for their sins but their behavior showed that they were not actually sorry for their sins. When you read through the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah who we are reading from today, but also prophets like Amos and Micah, when you read through the prophets you’ll notice that there are two sins that the prophets keep bringing up. And those two sins are idolatry (worshiping something besides the true God) and oppressing the poor. For example, back then there was nothing like social

security, so unless you personally provided for the elderly, they had no way of getting the basic necessities of life. But God's people often neglected to help the elderly. Another example of oppressing the poor back in those times would be if there were several years of bad harvests in a row, the small farmer would have to borrow money to buy his seed for the next year. And the person lending the money would only lend the money at an oppressively high interest rate. And the farmer had no choice but to accept the interest rate. He had to buy seed. But then he would never be able to climb out of that crushing debt.

In this passage God tells his people to stop oppressing the poor. **"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:6)** God says stop putting on the backs of these poor people a yoke that is impossibly heavy to bear.

But God does not want us to simply stop from oppressive practices, he also wants us to actively help those in need. Verse 7 says: **"Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isaiah 58:7)**

The book of Acts tells us about the very first followers of Jesus. And the very first followers of Jesus had a strong emphasis on helping those in need. It says in Acts 2 that **"they sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." (Acts 2:45)** In Acts 4:34-35 it says: **"There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."** They were under no obligation to do this. They did this freely. They were so moved by what Jesus had done for them, that they wanted to show that love for others.

Jesus gave himself for us. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death. But Jesus gave himself over to death for us to pay the penalty for our sins. Our sins would have kept us out of heaven. But now that Jesus has taken away

our sins by his death on the cross, heaven is our inheritance. Moved by that love of Jesus, we show the love of Jesus to those in need.

And when we show the love of Jesus to those in need, then that brings light to the world. Isaiah says: **"Then your light will break forth like the dawn."** In our Gospel Jesus said, **"You are the light of the world."** That's interesting because in other places Jesus says: **"I am the light of the world."** So how can Jesus say, "I am the light of the world" and then say to his followers "You are the light of the world"? Jesus' light shines through us. By our actions we can show other people what Jesus is like. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who provides for all of our needs. We can show that that is what Jesus is like by providing for the needs of others. Jesus loves others and we not only tell others that Jesus loves them, we show them that Jesus loves them by doing deeds of loving kindness for those in need. The love of Jesus shines through you when you help those in need.

We let our light shine by providing for those who are closest to us. Isaiah says **"do not turn away from your own flesh and blood."** (Isaiah 58:7) In the book of 1 Timothy, Paul tells us to put our religion into practice by providing for our families (1 Timothy 5:3-8). We also let our light shine by providing for those who are in our family of faith. Our second lesson says: **"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."** (Gal 6:10)

We also let our light shine when we help those whom we don't necessarily know but who obviously need our help. Remember Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan was walking down the road and he saw a person beaten on the side of the road. Jesus says that the Samaritan: **"A Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'" (Luke 10:33-35)**

We let our light shine when we show the love of Jesus to those who need our help. Isaiah says, **"then your righteousness will go before you."**

Whenever the Bible talks about "righteousness," the first thing we think of is that we are not righteous. The Bible says, "There is no one righteous, not even one." And that's a problem for us because Jesus says in our Gospel,

"Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of

heaven." (Matt 5:20) The Pharisees and the teachers of the law tried their very best to keep God's law, and if their righteousness can't get them into

the kingdom of heaven, then our righteousness can't get us in either. God says you have to have perfect righteousness to get into the kingdom of

heaven. But then how can anyone get into the kingdom of heaven? Jesus gives the answer in our Gospel: **"I did not come to abolish the law and**

the prophets but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17) Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life. He always showed kindness to the poor. He never oppressed

anybody. And Jesus gives to you his perfectly righteous life so you can get into heaven. Jesus has given us his perfect righteousness so that we can get

into the kingdom of heaven. And that gift of righteousness motivates us to live righteous lives ourselves. Isaiah says, **your righteousness will go**

before you." That means that other people will see our righteous lives.

Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." When we let our light shine, then our righteousness is going

before us so that other people may see it and glorify our Father in heaven.

"Our righteousness" goes before us, not of course in the sense that we are showing off. That would not cause people to glorify our father in heaven. No

our righteousness goes before us in the sense that we want to show other people the love that Christ has shown to us.

Let your light shine by helping those in need. And as Jesus says in our Gospel, that will bring glory to our Father in heaven. Amen.