

St. Paul: On The Same page

02.02.14 for Epiphany 5a

Day One: Isaiah 58:3-9a

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? "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?"

The world's problems are enormous. You know that. So when someone is standing at your door, confronting you with pamphlets about starvation, pollution, homelessness, abortion, what do you do in response to it all?

I know. You sign your name to a petition. Donate the five bucks in your wallet. Anything that will get them to leave you alone and let you to go back to the problems of your own daily life.

This is what God says through Isaiah. It's easier for us to fast and pray, to attend a worship service, or to do the

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden."

Matthew 5:14

usual religious rituals, than it is to really follow our heavenly Father in the work he desires to do in our world.

God calls us to set free the oppressed. Who can do that? But God says that we are really only set free from slavery when we are joined to our Savior and forgiven for our sins. You and I can't free people from an oppressive government, but we CAN set free those who are enslaved by Satan, showing them the light in Jesus Christ. First, we must live in that light ourselves.

Prayer: *Lord, you set me free. Give me your Spirit so that I may break the chains of sin that burden others, releasing them to rejoice in you. Amen.*

Day Two: 1 Cor 2:1-12

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

This sounds great, till you think about your own pastor.

Would you want your pastor's preaching to be "in weakness with great fear and trembling"? Or would you like it to be bold, interesting, with "wise and persuasive words"? Which sermon is most likely to keep you awake and entertained?

If you serve on the committee to find a new pastor, what kind of preacher will you be looking for? My guess is, you won't go looking for someone that describes himself like Paul.

The apostle says that his message came with "a demonstration of the Spirit's power." But this wasn't a PowerPoint. And it wasn't anything that seemed powerful. He's not talking

about miracles in the usual sense. (Paul did few reported miracles.) But he's talking about the greatest miracle, that the Holy Spirit worked through his words, and people came to faith in Jesus Christ, something generally invisible to the rest of us.

What makes a great sermon? Not just interesting stories, or funny jokes, or moving phrases, although those things may not be all bad. But it comes down to the hearer meeting Jesus Christ – and the promise of life and hope that comes in Jesus.

Here why God chooses to work through such humble things. It is so that our faith will be based on the Word, on God's promise, and not on human eloquence.

In the same way, Jesus came to us in a weak and even unattractive form, so that we would not be "forced" or pushed to believe, but rather experience the grace of God who made himself weak that we could be strong.

Prayer: *O Lord, I have griped about the sermon, wishing it were more inspiring for me. Help me to see and hear you in the sermon, no matter who is speaking. Amen.*

Day Three: Matthew 5:13-20

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

When I was a kid, projectors were not very common. We used a filmstrip projector sometimes in school. The teacher would advance the film one frame everytime a bell rang on the vinyl record. Today we see projected images everywhere, even in church!

Have you ever thought of yourself as a projector? In many ways you resemble one. Every way you turn, you project an image.

You choose your clothing with care in order to project an image of beauty or strength or wealth or competence or “coolness.” You watch what image others are projecting and sometimes try to imitate theirs. Or perhaps you try not to project, not to shine too brightly. You want to become invisible in the back of the room.

But you are always projecting an image, even in directions you never intended, to people you don’t know.

What should that image be? We can pretend that we share positive images, but the truth is people see through our smoke screen. They know how our little special effects are done. And so they suspect that we are not as holy, not as put together, not as good as we like to pretend.

Jesus says that we should project the light that has been given us. That doesn’t mean putting on a fake holiness. On the contrary, it means allowing people to see the darkness we have in common with them – and to see how the light of the gospel, the great news of forgiveness, has illuminated our lives.

Pop some popcorn. Turn down the lights. What will the people around you see today?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I washed again today, and remember that I am baptized into your death and resurrection. I have a new life, and put on your righteousness – not my own. Let all the world see you today in me. Amen.*

Day Four: Matthew 5:17

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them”.

The officer was waiting just inside the area where the speed limit had decreased from 65 to 55, so I thought maybe I would be excused. No such luck.

The speed limit was 70, but pretty much everyone was doing 75, so I thought that I'd get a break. ...Nope.

One child was throwing up all over the back seat, the other child was loudly wailing, there was no shoulder on the road where I could safely pull over to deal with this, we were just a few miles from our destination, and I was only doing 4 miles per hour over the limit, thinking that we would just hurry to our cousin's house where we could help the kids. “I'm sorry sir, but it's the Labor Day weekend and we've got lots of people on the road. We're being especially careful to keep people obeying the traffic laws. ...Here's your ticket.”

Yes, I had seen some of those other people on the road. A car load of young

people with their feet out the window, including the driver. Lots of people driving 80 or more. But... other people breaking the law does not take away the law for me.

The Law is the Law, that's what Jesus is saying. Or, as he says a few paragraphs later, “Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” That really is the Law.

Can we do it? Not even for a moment.

That's why Jesus' next words are so terribly important for us. Are you listening? “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

And that is what Jesus has done for us. That is what was finished when he said, “It is finished!”

No, there will be no ticket. No, there will be no punishment. No, there will be no death, no Hell, no being cast into darkness away from God. Jesus has endured it all, so that you may live – free, forgiven, loved, and at peace!

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I would try to the Law. But you have taken the Law upon yourself and placed your righteousness upon me. Lord let me live for you today. Amen.*