

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany; 9 February 2020
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
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Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 58:1–9a (9b–12), Psalm 112:1–9 (10), 1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16), Matthew 5:13–20

1 Black History Month

In February, St. Thomas' observes Black History Month. There are some in our world who would ask, "Why?" Why Black History Month? Why not Asian History Month? Why not White History Month?

It's the same protest that was lodged in the wake of the "Black Lives Matters" movement. Some people, mostly non-black persons, would respond, "All lives matter." And "Blue lives matter." And, well, yes they do. But there is a deep, tragic, irony in those responses.

The tragedy is this: we live in a world where White lives and White history are very clearly valued. But where the discriminatory policies which began in the House of Burgesses in colonial Virginia following Bacon's rebellion subsequently blossomed forth into chattel slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, and a continuing environment of formal and informal discrimination.

American evangelical author Jim Wallis, among others, refers to racism as America's Original Sin. Racism one of the principalities and powers against which we battle, one that is especially potent in America today. It is power, practice, policy that inhabits American culture and taints all of us who take part in that culture. It's a habit of deep injustice that is part of the water in which we swim, the air we breathe, and that many of us, especially those who identify as White and enjoy the privilege associated with whiteness, will never notice until we stop and look carefully. Sort of like the way we look at Scripture.

Fortunately, I believe our scripture passages today have something to say to this original sin. The Scriptures hold some good news for us today.

2 Salt & Light

In our Gospel today Jesus says, "You are the salt of the world. You're not just the garlic of Glassboro or the cumin of Clayton or even the wasabi of Williamstown! You are the light, says Jesus in Matthew, of the cosmos, the entire universe! How silly it is to conceal the light you have to offer by chaining it in church, by hiding it in your home. If God is living in you and you put a wicker basket over the flame, you're likely to burn down the entire house!

3 τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφήτας

Jesus goes on to say, Don't think I've come to abolish the Torah or the prophets. Those are media through which God cultivates the flame and makes it brighter! We talked about Torah last week. Did you hear the prophet today? False religion, unsalty salt and a darkened light is a religion that gives lip-service to the Bible, that performs rituals and liturgies, that bows the head at the name of Jesus and wears fancy clothes to church, but which exploits others, cares only for itself, quarrels and squabbles and strikes others with a fist or with policy.

The brightly shining flame, though, the people whom God hears and who witness the presence of God in their lives, are a different kind of people. They are those who: smash the fetters of injustice, free those stuck in exploitative cycles of debt or employment, liberate those oppressed by history or prejudice or inequality, and oppose every form of discrimination. The ones who witness God's response to their prayers are the ones who share their food with the hungry, provide shelter for the homeless and winter coats for those who lack them. The promise, the inside information you would not have guessed, the teaching of the Prophet, is that it is precisely in the doing of these things that your eyes will be opened and you will learn how to see God!

4 Righteousness that exceeds

Our passage this week ends with Jesus demanding of us a righteousness that exceeds that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, of those professional students of the Bible who had a tradition of interpreting the Word of God as law.

And I want to recognize two things about that. First, Jesus demands greater fidelity to the teachings of Scripture. But the greater fidelity has room for even greater grace. And this is good news. Let me explain.

5 Exceeds – from the heart

Righteousness that exceeds that of the Scribes and the Pharisees is a righteousness that comes from the heart. It's not concerned with checking off specific chores and obligations, particular seasons and hours of the day. Instead, it's a righteousness that understands the purpose of Scripture as formational: forming our hearts to be shaped like God's heart. So that whether the circumstance we encounter is described in the Bible or not, we can make a surprisingly accurate guess about how God would respond and follow that example.

6 Exceeds – empowered

And here's where the greater grace comes in:

A law of checkboxes keeps a record. Have I done more right or more wrong today? A person is righteous based on their history. It's like your driving record or your credit history. Your mistakes in the past continue to haunt you for years to come.

That kind of consistency is not what Jesus requires of us. That's the consistency demanded by those who are concerned with keeping the rules and keeping the score.

But God doesn't play that game. God doesn't keep score. The score was nailed to the cross with Jesus, and we were all declared winners. We're playing the game, but the end has already been decided, and we are free to play for the joy of it!

What then of righteousness? Every moment I start anew, making a decision for God or against. Every moment I start anew, making a decision for crossing boundaries or for fortifying them. Every moment I start a new, making a decision for racial equality or for my own privilege.

And every time I fail in one of these, it's not the end of the world. It's not even the end of the game! Instead, every time, I'm like a little child learning to walk. Each time I fall, my heavenly father gently takes my hand, utters an encouraging word, and invites me to try again.

My righteousness depends solely on the love of God and the salvation I find in the death and resurrection of Jesus. My righteousness is not defined by what I did yesterday. It's not a trend over time like an RBI. Yesterday's mistakes do not carry over. I am free to learn and grow and change and try, try again.

7 that abundant life

So here's the good news. To live as salt and light does not mean to perfectly eliminate all impurity, all darkness from the world. To be salt and light is simply to live into the moment we've been given, to enact Torah and Prophets, to fight against injustice and to work for reconciliation, in our lives and in our spheres of influence. It means to practice the work of Kitchen of Hope and Family Promise not out of a sense of obligation, but in the joyful recognition that in the little details of these ministries we are striking a blow for justice. We are not called to do work that is perfect and complete. We are simply called to be faithful with what we have and who we are.

The same applies to racial reconciliation. We are not called to perfection, but to engagement, to learning and growing. For someone like me who identifies as White, that call is very often to listen and to learn and to be open to the challenging, convicting truths I don't like to hear. It is to acknowledge my own racism and to strive anew to live beyond it every day.

Jesus says, "you are salt," "you are light." You have what you need to be those things today. It just takes humility, desire, and maybe courage. In our collect today we ask God for "the liberty of that abundant love which you have made known to us in your son our Savior Jesus Christ." It is a liberty to be imperfect, to shine with an unfinished, unrefined passion, to live into our faith with gusto, to make mistakes, to be forgiven, and to try again.

Celebrating Black History Month is one example of how we as a people tie together Preaching and Action, Liturgy and Justice, Worship and Good works. It's how we let our light shine and our saltiness influence the world around us.

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