

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Year A, RCL



Isaiah 58:1-9a, (9b-12)

Psalm 112:1-9

Matthew 5:13-20

The Collect

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)

Thus says the high and lofty one
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
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.
Yet 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.
“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.
Look, 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.
Is 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?
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?
Then 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.
Then 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,
if 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.
The 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.
Your 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.

Psalm 112:1-9 Page 755, BCP

Beatus vir

1 Hallelujah!

Happy are they who fear the Lord
and have great delight in his commandments!

2 Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.

3 Wealth and riches will be in their house,
and their righteousness will last for ever.

4 Light shines in the darkness for the upright;
the righteous are merciful and full of compassion.

5 It is good for them to be generous in lending
and to manage their affairs with justice.

6 For they will never be shaken;
the righteous will be kept in everlasting remembrance.

7 They will not be afraid of any evil rumors;
their heart is right;
they put their trust in the Lord.

8 Their heart is established and will not shrink,
until they see their desire upon their enemies.

9 They have given freely to the poor,
and their righteousness stands fast for ever;
they will hold up their head with honor.

Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus said, “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.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In 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.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For 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. Therefore, 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

SERMON

I'd like to imagine that we are in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1965, on the eve of an attempted coup against the government of President Sukarno. Guy Hamilton, a young Australian journalist, is on his first foreign assignment and trying very hard to appear more confident than he really is. He has been assigned a local photographer named Billy Kwan.

Scene One: Typical Journo's Answer

Billy Kwan (played by Stewart), dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, is polishing the lens of a camera when Guy Hamilton walks in, carrying a laptop. Guy is all business, and scarcely acknowledges Billy's presence. He sits at the table, on the opposite side from Billy. He busies himself with the laptop. After a short interval, Billy looks at him and speaks.

BILLY: Most of us become children again when we enter the slums of Asia. And last night I watched you walk back into childhood. With all its opposite intensities: laughter and misery, the crazy and the grim, toy town and a city of fear.

GUY looks up, a bit annoyed, then returns to fiddling with the laptop. There is another uncomfortable pause.

BILLY: And the people asked him, saying, What then shall we do?

GUY: *(Looks up sharply)* What's that?

BILLY: It's from Luke, chapter three, verse ten. What then must we do? Tolstoy asked the same question. He wrote a book with that title. He got so upset about the poverty in Moscow that he went one night into the poorest section and just gave away all his money. You could do that now. Five American dollars would be a fortune to one of these people.

Guy continues to fiddle with the laptop, and addresses the screen.

GUY: Wouldn't do any good, just be a drop in the ocean.

BILLY: Ah, that's the same conclusion Tolstoy came to, I disagree.

Guy is interested now, and looks up, engag-

ing Billy for the first time.

GUY: Oh, what's your solution?

BILLY: Well, I support the view that you just don't think about the major issues. You do whatever you can about the misery that's in front of you. Add your light to the sum of light. You think that's naive, don't you?

GUY: Yep.¹

That dialog from the 1982 film, *The Year of Living Dangerously*² has so much to say to us about our response to others in God's creation, condensed down into that harrowing question from Luke, "And the people asked him, saying, 'What then shall we do?'"

My teachers warned me in the strongest possible terms against using one Gospel to explain another but if you don't tell Dr. Wes Allen or Dr. Lon Oliver what I'm up to, I would suggest that our passage from Matthew is the answer to the

1 "The Year of Living Dangerously" Copyright 1982 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer / United Artists

2 Ibid.

question posed by Luke. Luke asked, “What then shall we do?” Matthew answered, “Jesus said, ‘You are the light of the world.’” How should the light of the world approach God’s children?

Last Sunday we touched on the possibility that our relative comfort blinds us to the suffering around us, leading us to believe that there is no suffering to which we are called to respond. When we are comfortable in our surroundings, we see what we wish to see. That frees us to imagine that we are justified in focusing our attention only on our own salvation. Familiarity breeds contempt, as the saying goes, but such a thing represents a great poverty of the spirit. When we are dropped into unfamiliar surroundings, everything presses against us with an unavoidable urgency. As Billy Kwan put it, “Most of us become children again when we enter the slums of Asia.” The people who live there may see it as just the way things are, but when Guy Hamilton comes face to face with it for the first time, Billy says,

“And last night I watched you walk back into childhood, with all its opposite intensities: laughter and misery, the crazy and the grim, toy town and a city of fear.”

To see, to truly see as a child sees, is to respond unless your soul has been so shriveled that it can no longer recognize another soul. To perceive the needs and the suffering of another, and then to respond is the action of a soul which has found its connection to the eternal, or, in Billy Kwan’s words:

Well, I support the view that you just don't think about the major issues. You do whatever you can about the misery that's in front of you. Add your light to the sum of light.

“Add your light to the sum of light.” Billy Kwan has it just right. What is the point or the usefulness in being the light of the world if we do not add our light to the sum of light? How can we do that if we remain purposefully blind?

Second Isaiah wrote to the people Israel who were in exile in Babylon in penance for their sin in these words:

Thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
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.

Yet 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;

God is the Holy one who inhabits eternity. God is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, and to connect with the eternal is to connect with God and to see your surroundings and to respond to it as if for the first time, as a child, for the Holy One has demands upon your time.

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.

How can we be the salt of the earth if responding to the soul cries of others is somewhere down on our “to-do list”?

I want to offer Mother Theresa or Mahatma Gandhi as examples of people contemporary to us who connected in this way to the eternal, but those examples have been done to death. Right now I’m reaching for two of my favorite TV shows: “Holmes Makes It Right” and “Holmes Inspections”. They are Canadian productions featuring Mike Holmes, a contractor. He comes in after a home inspector has done a

bad job and missed a lot of stuff or after a contractor has fouled up a job, and he “makes it right”. He makes it right, he tells us, because it drives him crazy to see a job done wrong. He is invited in because a kitchen designer put in a new kitchen and the counter tops slope. Once he starts demolition he finds that the plumbing is not up to code and the electrical is not up to code and the HVAC is dangerous, and he can’t leave it like that, and winds up gutting the house and doing it right. He is so connected with the building codes and the principles of sound construction that he cannot look past things that are not up to code.

It’s that sort of connection to the eternal that I am urging upon you as the work of a Christian. Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached and wrote against the idea of cheap grace – a faith that makes no demands upon you beyond your own salvation. Archbishop Timothy Dolan picked up on the idea and said

Maybe the greatest threat to the Church is not heresy, not dissent, not secularism, not even moral relativism, but this sanitized, feel-good, boutique,

therapeutic spirituality, that makes no demands, calls for no sacrifice, asks for no conversion, entails no battle against sin, but only soothes and affirms.

I can do no other than to agree with the Archbishop.

When I speak with the people at the Chapel of St. Arbuck's about Christianity, I hear two views over and over. The first, from those outside the church, holds the church to be a thoroughly corrupt and intellectually dishonest organization that is all about controlling people's behavior and collecting money. The second view is that following certain rules of behavior and making liberal donations to the church is the way one ensures a ticket to heaven after death. Both views are monstrously wrong. The work of a Christian has nothing whatsoever to do with treading the party line or giving money to the church. It has to do with connecting with the eternal in such a way that you bring your light into a hurting world and are consumed with the need to "make it right".

Well, I support the view that you just don't think about the major issues. You do whatever you can about the misery that's in front of you. Add your

light to the sum of light.

“Add your light to the sum of light”. Billy Kwan has it just right. I have not the skill to say that better.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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