

Isaiah 58:1-12

¹Shout 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

¹³“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 lamp stand, 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.

COACH JESUS

I have two confessions to make (when a pastor says this, your ears should perk up): First, I very often skipped school. I wasn't truant – just disappearing once I exited a school bus; rather I faked illness to avoid going to school. I did the Ferris Bueller. I would lie in bed and look pathetic and sound weak – and I guess I was a pretty good actor because I got away with it quite often. When Mom and Dad had gone I didn't drive around in a Ferrari, dance in parades, or eat in fine restaurants, but once the coast was clear, on went the television set or record player, out came the toys or games, and I would spend the next six or eight hours doing whatever I felt like doing. As I got older, I got even better at this routine; I had the same M.O. - I lay in bed, sounded weak, complained of headache or nausea - but if Mom or Dad expressed any doubt about my seriousness of my illness, I would appeal to them on moral grounds: "Mom, I don't want to get everyone *else* sick (cough, cough)." I became more strategic in scheduling my fake illnesses; I would develop my pseudo-headaches and pseudo-nausea on mornings when key assignments were due, or when tests-for-which-I-had-not-studied were scheduled to take place. I was also careful only to limit my histrionics so as not to exceed the maximum number of absences allowed to still graduate.

I approached Sunday School the same way - faking illness so I could stay home and watch television – but I could afford to do this more often because I was never really concerned about "passing" Sunday School (I would have been embarrassed if I *had* failed Sunday School); I was never aware of any minimum attendance requirements for Sunday School, so I could feign illness with impunity. True with confirmation I was actually required to attend and complete assignments, but when that was over I was back to my old ways. And there was really no motivation for me to continue with church once I was confirmed, because unlike High School, no one really cared if I had a Sunday School diploma.

My experience illustrates both the pitfall and the strength of Protestant Christianity. The pitfall is that Protestant churches do not advance the notion that attendance at church or Sunday School has very much to do with salvation. Church is not like high school – you don't get to heaven by meeting attendance requirements or passing tests in Sunday School. Protestants insist we are saved solely by grace through faith. Protestant Christianity does not claim that salvation is contingent upon our church involvement or our partaking of the sacraments. We recognize all too well error of the people who Isaiah is addressing in today's Old Testament lesson – good, "religious" folks who kept all their rituals, did the proper sacrifices, and when things got really bad engaged in fasting to gain God's favor. What good do these rituals do? None! God ignores them. God does not relieve their suffering. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Today they might ask, "If I've been going to church and doing all the right rituals, why am I suffering so?" And God answers them, saying in essence, "All the rituals you've been performing are pointless if you continue to cheat people and steal and abuse and treat others unfairly – THAT'S the kind of ritual I want you to follow; feeding the hungry, doing justice, to set free the oppressed, *just as I set you free from the Egyptians*. What good is a sin offering if you just go out and

commit the same sin once the offering is made? You yourself have brought on this calamity because you've failed to do the things that really matter to me." The danger of religion is that it tends to define righteousness strictly in terms of pushing all the right buttons, following through with all the right rituals, and keeping a schedule. We tend to make religion all about following laws. And then, like Ferris Bueller, like yours truly, you'll try to get away with as much as you can and still pass.

Protestant Christianity has a different pitfall, namely cheap grace. We look at the formula of salvation – that it comes by grace through faith – and we try to figure out what the minimum faith requirement is – some reduce it to an acknowledgment that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God – believe this notion and you're saved forever, and with this salvation comes pardon for all the sins that you continue to commit. We can live just like everyone else in the world, pursuing all the pleasures and possessions, but since we declare our faith in Jesus as God's son, we get to ride the escalator going up. Now I absolutely believe that we are saved by grace through faith, but when you consider the magnitude of the grace we have been given, we should show some gratitude. How do we do that? By doing what God asks us to do. Martin Luther King Jr. aptly pointed out that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," so it's not a matter of simply looking out for number one. Our problem is that we can't seem to do what God is expecting of us - to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, to clothe the naked, and, as Isaiah puts it, "to not hide yourself from your own kin," meaning that every human being is our kin, and our failure to address anyone's needs is hiding ourselves from them. We fail in our efforts to truly love others. And so we appeal to God's grace, rightly so, but we diminish grace into a tonic that relieves us of responsibilities to others, and now, as Bob Dylan so eloquently put, we can "sing 'Amazing Grace' all the way to the Swiss banks." That is what I call cheap grace, a grace that understands God as merely a tool that we can use to relieve us of responsibility. And so there are plenty of Protestants who rely on grace the way you rely on your "get-out-of-jail-free" card in the game of Monopoly.

Jesus is quite blunt about obeying God's commandments; "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," and "unless **your** righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never **enter** the kingdom of heaven." Truth be told, a lot of scribes and Pharisees were good folks doing good deeds a good deal of the time. They were renowned as righteous pillars of the community. But they defined righteousness as accuracy in following the written law to a T without caring a whole lot about the people around them. They had reduced God to a computer that simply demanded that we push the right buttons. Jesus is telling us that our righteousness needs to be qualitatively different from their righteousness. It's not about pushing the right buttons; it's about having the right heart. And it's not so much a matter of *what* we do but rather what motivates us to do it. A good illustration: You are an expert chef working the finest restaurant in Manhattan and your parents are customers. The meal that you cook for your

parents might be same whether you love your parents or not, but what matters to God and what would matter to your parents, is that you prepared a wonderful meal for them not because you were expected to but because you love them. We are expected to be the salt of the earth, those who spread God's love through word and deed. We are expected to shine our light unto the nations, to set an example of kingdom life, of living as God calls us to live. Our righteousness should exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. How? We may do the same righteous deeds, but we're motivated by love, and thus our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.

It's important that you don't misread today's gospel lesson as a prescribed behavior that you must adhere to – because then you're no different than a scribe or a Pharisee, looking for that "rule" that you need to follow in order to pass the test, looking for the button you have to push to ensure that your next stop is the pearly gates. No, Jesus is not simply giving us a commandment and telling us to follow it. Jesus is actually saying that we *already are* following it. Listen to his words:

"You are the salt of the earth," not "if you want to be the salt of the earth, do this."
"You are the light of the word," not "in order to be the light of the world, do this."

Jesus is telling us that we're already there, and this is great news for us. This is the essence of grace that we have to get through our heads. Jesus is not saying, "To reach me, you need to start acting right." Jesus is saying that he is already with us. Later in the gospel of Matthew, he says, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also," and "Remember I am with you, even till the end of the age." We can't shake him, and this is incredibly good news!

Because Christ is with us, we can do anything, and when we truly acknowledge that presence, we will do everything. The church is a present reflection of the kingdom of heaven (as we endeavor to live righteously with Christ and one another) as well as a dynamic and synergistic force that advances God's kingdom in this world. Think of church as a verb, something you do, not just on Sunday at 7033 Amboy Road but every day of the week and everywhere you go. Think of the church as an opportunity, to engage in sacred mission with others with complimentary talents to accomplish far more than we could individually.

At the beginning of this sermon I mentioned that I had two confessions to make. Here's the second one: I told many of you that I was not going to watch the Super Bowl last Sunday, but I did watch most of the game. I criticize the Super Bowl sometimes for it glorifying violence – men smashing into other men, sometimes with the intent to hurt. I criticize it for its competitive nature – the mindset of one team against another to gain money and fame. But I also see some positive aspects to it, among them is the observation of teamwork. It's great that a defensive player, Malcolm Smith, was selected as MVP, because I think it demonstrates that the game is just as much about preventing scoring as it is about scoring. And offense or defense, each team has players suited for a particular need. Some need speed; others bulk. Some are more proactive while others are more reactive. Some specialize in but one skill – kicking. And what matters in the end is not how good

you are in your particular position but **how well you work together toward a common goal.** I look at this congregation and I see a variety of skills and gifts and abilities, but above all I see a winning team. I see a diversity of opinions on important social issues, but I know that when we're guided by the Holy Spirit we will find common ground. Jesus is more coach than quarterback, because he's not strictly offense. And as we embark on mission, be it meals for Project Hospitality or teaching children about Jesus and the Bible or Christmas Caroling to members or decorating the sanctuary or playing music or balancing our budget or representing our church at Annual Conference or just praying for those in need, we are a team, a diverse team with so many talents. None of us are perfect, but we all go forward in mission together with Christ as our coach. A church enables us to do more than any of us could individually. Let us pray that we would work together, as salt of the earth, as light on a hill, and as disciples of Jesus, to love and to serve.