

5th SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
February 9, 2020

Text: Isaiah 58:1-9a

Theme: Let Your Light Shine

In my sermon last Sunday, I spoke on the importance of church rituals. Rituals ground us in worship and are the visible, outward expressions of our faith. But this week our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah balances our love for rituals with a word of caution. Our religious customs (when unaccompanied by social action) are just self-serving. What we hear today is that God is asking us for both. Rituals all by themselves will not ensure us that we are in a right relationship with God. However, when our rituals lead us to love of God and love of neighbor then we are on the right track.

It is important to understand the context of Isaiah 58. It was written during a time of uncertainty. During their exile a number of important leaders had been deported. Although some were returning to the land, the stabilizing institutions of the temple had been wiped out. The people had no idea what the future would hold, and their feelings of uncertainty made them into anxious people.

How do we get back on track with God?

How do we get close to God again?

For them there seemed to be a simple and logical solution. They would simply return to their rituals. So they fasted but lo and behold God did not see. So they humbled themselves but lo and behold God did not notice. *Was not this what the Lord required of them?*

Now the people were not only anxious, but they were confused. They truly believed they were doing everything right by following the laws of the Lord. But what God saw was that they fasted and then they turned around and oppressed all their workers. What God noticed was that they humbled themselves and then they turned around and fought and quarreled. Clearly God would not pay attention to such fasting.

The situation of those in exile made me think about September 11, 2001 because for all Americans it was our day of uncertainty. A major catastrophic event led us to be an anxious people.

On that same day many of us opened our houses of worship to offer the people a place to pray and to grieve. Our rituals offered comfort to people who were unsure of what the next day would bring. And some took it a step further.

On the fifteenth anniversary of September 11, Bishop Eaton (the ELCA Presiding Bishop) shared the story about a Lutheran pastor in the Metropolitan New York Synod who served a local congregation and also served as chaplain to the local fire department. On that fateful day the pastor saw the first plane hit the first tower and he ran immediately to the fire station. When he arrived the firefighters were already putting on their gear. The pastor gathered them together, marked the cross on their foreheads with oil and prayed. As the firefighters ran into the building the people who survived said they could see the cross shining on the foreheads of the firefighters, and it brought them comfort. In that great darkness and deep suffering the light of Christ appeared. A ritual of the church led to love of God and love of neighbor. The pastor was on the right track.

On this day we will follow the ritual of the church and I will baptize Hudson Oliver Browning. I will mark the cross of Christ on his forehead with oil. We baptize to grow in our faith so that on any given day we can stand with courage and hope in the dark places of our world. It is where all who believe in Jesus Christ are sent. God has entrusted us with his work of reconciliation. God has entrusted us to give witness to the love of Christ that is stronger than hate. God has shown us that the life of Christ is stronger than death. Joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through the baptismal rite Hudson Oliver will become a light to the world.

God is clear that we are to move beyond our rituals and work to unlock whatever keeps people in bondage. We are to set the downtrodden free and restore the weak and vulnerable. From our worship we are to offer our bread to the hungry and take care of the homeless. When we see someone naked we are to clothe them. We are not to hide from those in need. We are to let our light shine. We are to let our good works give glory to our Father in heaven.

Some of you may receive *Living Lutheran* (a publication of our church – the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). In the February issue it gave concrete examples of congregations that went outside its walls to minister to people in need. One church in Michigan recently formed a new ministry called *Pathways in Compassion*. Members of the church visit people in nursing facilities who never have visitors. It received such a positive response from the staff at the facility that the pastor then wrote a workbook to help other congregations develop a similar visitation program. I am thinking that with Sunrise being built right next door to us that we might want to purchase that workbook. God put a wonderful opportunity right in our backyard.

And then I read about a member of another church who had been homeless four times in her life. She became the driving force behind a ministry called *Laundry and More*. Every Tuesday members go to the same laundromat with quarters stuffed in their pockets to help those who cannot otherwise afford to do their laundry. Each week they spend up to \$500 (all in quarters) for individuals and families on the fringe of society. And while the homeless wash their clothes the volunteers serve a meal and distribute clothing (and any household items) that the people could use.

Last week at our annual meeting Deanna introduced a new initiative. We will partner with Lord of Life Lutheran Church in Fairfax who has already coordinated with the county to help ensure that everyone without a home has access to a shelter during the coldest months of winter. I hope that some of our members will be able to be part of this ministry of presence (offering them not just food but a chance to listen to their stories). Isaiah reminds us that we are to remove the burdens of others and satisfy the needs of the afflicted.

Such acts of love are so practical and so tangible.

It is something that can be tasted and seen. It is speaking a kind word. It is being generous with our compassion, time, and money to care for and make a difference in the lives of the poor, the hungry, and the homeless. It is faithfulness to God and a commitment to others shown by listening and being available. It is choosing a life of selfless-giving. It is love of God and of neighbor. It is embedded both within our rituals and what we do outside our church walls. It is not an *either – or* option with God. It is *both – and*. Amen