Trading a Pointed Finger for a Mirror
A Sermon on Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 5:12-17 by the Rev. Philip Major
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What a week this has been. Any comprehensive list of the unique events and headlines of the past week would require most of the time I’ve allotted for this sermon. Let me name just three. First, beginning eight days ago Great Britain is no longer part of the European Union. Second, on Tuesday evening the Speaker of the US House of Representatives tore up the printed text of the President’s State of the Union address on live television at the conclusion of the speech. Third, on Thursday, Dr. Li Wenliang, a doctor in Wuhan, China, died from the corona virus. Dr. Li was the doctor who first alerted the world to the rapid spread of a new, deadly corona virus. After Dr. Li told other doctors about the rapidly spreading disease, he was forced by the government to say that he had lied and that he had engaged in criminal activity by warning his colleagues of the threat. In the hours following Dr. Li’s death thousands of Chinese citizens expressed grief and outrage at the government for their treatment of Dr. Li.

These three events share a common feature: the people involved in them are angry. People are angry at their own government, or at their political opponents, or at the immigrants, or the corporations, or the bureaucrats. People are angry.

Today it seems many people are angry. Sometimes the anger comes from weakness, or ignorance or lack of moral character. Sometimes the anger is justified. One of my favorite theological books is titled, The Enigma of Anger. In the book Garrett Keizer makes the argument that, from a Christian perspective, there are times when anger is the only loving, justified response to the events of our lives.

Sometimes anger is justified, but more often the teaching of one of my teachers is more relevant. My teacher warned me, “When you are angry someone is likely to get hurt, and the person who is most likely to get hurt is you.” Especially today, when it seems like there is much to be angry about, we need to consider whether our anger is productive for us and for others.

These thoughts about anger and the relative usefulness of anger are prompted by our reading from Isaiah, chapter 58. Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. The prophet’s words are directed to the people of Israel following their return from exile in Babylon.

The religious and political leaders have returned home to Jerusalem, following decades of exile in a foreign land. They are reestablishing their religious practices in their home country. They are rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. But something is wrong.

The problem is religious hypocrisy. The prophet’s words are heavy, dripping with critique of the religious leaders. Day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’

Do you see the problem? The religious leaders are proud of themselves. The religious elites are so proud of all of their grand prayers and elaborate ceremonies and rigorous fasting. When they are engaged in these supposedly religious activities their attention is not directed towards God. Their prayers and ceremonies and fasting are for the purpose of self-promotion.

Their hypocrisy is easy to detect. When these religious superstars are engaged in fasting and wearing sackcloth, their treatment of others is terrible; “on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists.” Isaiah’s critique of the religious leaders is harsh. It cuts to the heart, questioning the motivations, the values and the faith of religious leaders.

So, it is remarkable that the verses of Isaiah 58 are sacred scripture for Jews and Christians. When religious leaders read Isaiah 58 in worship, we are reading a warning to ourselves. Isaiah 58 criticizes religious leaders for pointing the finger at others and talking maliciously of others. Isaiah 58 sounds like just another angry person pointing the finger at someone in a different group, until you realize that the
author is one of the group of religious leaders. Isaiah 58 sounds like a pointed finger, but it is more like a mirror than a pointed finger. As we read Isaiah 58 in worship, Christians and Jews are holding up a mirror to their own activities for self-criticism.

A wise old preacher once told me that one of the startling innovations of the Hebrew religion is that it placed self-criticism at the center of religious practice. Isaiah tells us to trade the image of a pointed finger for the image of a mirror. When we are pointing fingers at others we are not following the way of Isaiah. When we are examining our own actions, when we are reflective about our words, we are most often moving forward on the spiritual path.

Jesus builds on Isaiah’s work by placing a concern for religious hypocrisy in the center of the religious conversation. In our Gospel passage Jesus encourages his disciples to be reflective about their own behavior: 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. For Jesus and his disciples, salt had many connotations, all of them positive. Salt was valuable. Salt was a preservative. Salt was a symbol for a covenant relationship.

For Jesus and his disciples, salt did not come in 1-pound boxes from Wegman’s. Salt was not refined. Salt was kept in your kitchen in rough form, in the form of small rocks that contained salt crystals. Most people had some of these salt rocks in the place where they cooked, because salt is an essential ingredient.

If you were making a pot of soup and you wanted to add salt to the water you could put one of these rocks with salt crystals into the pot of hot water for a minute, until some of the salt was dissolved into the water. Salt lost its taste when all of the salt crystals had been removed from the rock. The rock might still be sitting on the counter, looking like a chunk of salt, but it was worthless. Salt is not valued for the way it looks. Salt is valuable because it is useful.

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. Jesus cautions his disciples that going through the motions is not enough. It is not good enough for salt to look like a chunk of salt. That chunk of salt has to be useful. That chunk of salt has to be effective. Salt has to be salt.

In the same way, it is not good enough to have the outward appearance of living a spiritual life. It is not good enough to pray and fast and go to church and read the scriptures. Our spiritual life has to be effective. Our spiritual life has to have an effect on us and on the world, otherwise it is useless. Jesus is teaching his disciples to be self-reflective, to do a self-examination.

Two thousand years of spectacular failures in the church have proved Isaiah’s point and Jesus’ point that the authenticity of our spiritual lives is shaped by self-reflection, not by pointing the finger. It never helps to point the finger at someone else and criticize them for their lack of spiritual authenticity. We only continue on the spiritual path by looking at ourselves in the mirror, through a process of honest self-examination.

It is not easy to hold up that mirror of self-examination. Sometimes we are afraid to look in that mirror. Living in a world of pointed fingers, even those who don’t point the finger at others end up judging themselves harshly.

If we are judging ourselves harshly we are probably not hearing what Jesus is saying in our Gospel. Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth.” Jesus says, “You are one of the most essential, valuable parts of God’s creation.” He is saying that to you.

You are valuable. Your work is essential. The love God has placed in the center of your life is exactly what the world needs. Now please, look in the mirror. What do you see? Do you see yourself giving love to others? That is your treasure. That is what God wants you to see.

So I encourage you to look in the mirror. It is not easy to do. You will see places where you have failed to achieve what you have hoped for yourself. That is true for all of us, because all of us have failed in some way. But if you look closely you will also see this great power God has given you.

Do you see how your work has had an effect on others? That is what God sees. Do you see the continuing, beautiful potential of your life, even if you are near the end of your life? That is what God sees. Do you see the love God has placed in the center of your life? That is what God sees.