
Why Do We Fast, But You Do Not See?

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
Epiphany 5 – Year A**

“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

That’s what the Israelites cry to God when they’ve returned from exile, full of hope and faith—only to find their land and homes in ruins, and themselves in conflict with their new neighbors and one another. Only to find that this is all so very hard—so much harder than they’d expected. So they turn to what they know to do as people of faith: fasting, worshipping, humbling themselves—trying to get God’s attention, trying to get God to do something, and to make good on all those beautiful promises about restoration.

But God doesn’t seem to see or hear them. Their situation doesn’t seem to be changing. And they start to wonder if their effort is in vain.

However, God’s apparent silence doesn’t mean that God hasn’t been listening. On the contrary, God has been paying close attention—close enough attention to see how empty their worship is, how driven by self-interest, and how divorced from justice.

So God answers: “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?... 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.”

Now, you may, like me, be nodding your head in confident agreement. After all, we’re much less likely to be found fasting, or bowing our heads like a bulrush, or lying in sackcloth and ashes, than to be found doing the very things God commands: rallying against injustice, helping the homeless and hungry, finding clothes for those who need them, caring for our families. Plus, we’ve heard Jesus, and Paul preach against religious legalism, so it’s easy for us to judge Isaiah’s audience for so grossly missing the point.

Which is why we have to be careful not to make this into a new moral calculus or legalistic if-then—replacing fasting with social activism or right belief or politics, or whatever our preferred form of righteousness is. The fact is that we’re just as susceptible to self-interest. And we’re just as likely to use religion and good spiritual practices, or anything we invest ourselves in religiously, to prove ourselves good and important and righteous—even superior to and separate from others.

In his book *Let Your Life Speak*,^[1] Parker Palmer recalls how he’d always been told, and himself believed, that he should be an important leader, like the president of a major institution. And how his younger self had conjured up all the highest ideals he could, and tried to conform his life to them, whether they were his or not—whether that was really his life, or not. While in graduate school in Berkeley, he discovered that he loved teaching. But at the time, he saw working in academia as a sell-out, and teaching as a cop-out. So he left on a white horse, or high horse, to solve the urban crisis in DC.

After 7 years of community organizing, he burned out. Not only had he been unable to effect the change he wanted, but he was also miserable and disappointed in himself and God. “Why am I working so hard, O God, and things don’t seem to be getting any better?”

Humbled and scared, Palmer took a yearlong sabbatical at a Quaker community called Pendle Hill. There, he came face to face with his deep fear of failure, painful doubts about himself and his vocation, and the hard truth

that he had “allowed ego and ethics to lead [him] into a situation that [his] soul could not abide”—and had perhaps done damage along the way.

Burnout, he reflects later, is not the result of trying to give too much, as much as the result of trying to give what you do not possess. And burnout, he says, forced him to seek another way, thankfully; to listen less to his ego and “should’s,” and more to his own soul and to God; to accept his gifts and limitations and to serve the world and God through them, as the teacher he loved to be.

And so he titles his book, “*Let your life speak*.” Which sounds a bit like our Gospel today: “*Let your light shine*,” Jesus says, “so that others may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” And perhaps because we may be tempted to turn this into yet another moral calculus or self-improvement project, Jesus makes clear that it isn’t. Though, to be clear, he *does* take the law—and all those *shall’s* and *shall not’s*—very seriously, and commands us to do likewise. It’s just that he calls us to a more radical ethic, rooted in the God who is their beginning and end.

Note that he doesn’t say, “*if* you could just do a little bit more, or try a little harder, or be more like that person over there, you could be the light of the world, or the salt of the earth—but you *are* the light of the world.”

Nor does he say, “Now, figure out your best and most impressive light, the light you think you should have, and *make* it shine.” But “*Let your light shine. Let your light shine.*” Let God shine, and speak, through your life—let your life speak the good news in the way that only our life can speak it.

And if seems like your light is burning out, remember and return to its source, the light of Christ, which never runs out. Remember *why* you do the holy and Christian things you do: not to prove yourself or make yourself good or lovable, or to get what you want from God, but because it’s who you are in Christ, and who you are gives glory to God. And the world needs the light that only you can shine, in the dark places that only you can see, by the light of Jesus.

As the Allegro Choir sang this morning, “Many are the light-beams from the one light. Our one light is Jesus.”^[ii]

^[i] Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (Jossey-Bass, 2000)

^[ii] Words by Anders Frostenson (1906-2006); tr. Pablo D. Sosa (1933-2020).