

## Get Real!

Matthew 5:14-16 and 6:1, 16-18

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About a year ago, I was at a conference where I listened to Barbara Brown Taylor preach a two-part sermon called “The Wise and Foolish Church.” She compared two passages, both from the gospel of Matthew. In one passage (Matt 25:1-13), Jesus teaches his disciples that to be ready for the coming kingdom of God means to be like five wise bridesmaids who had lamps full of oil and saved up that precious oil even as five other bridesmaids did not have enough. Save up. Be ready. But in the second passage (Matt 26:6-13, which requires the turn of only one page in my Bible), Jesus praises a woman for a different kind of act. As she pours out a costly jar of oil on Jesus, he tells her that wherever the good news is proclaimed, her generous act will be remembered. Pour out. Be ready.

So which is it – save up or pour out? I do not preach with the skill of Barbara Brown Taylor, and that is not the question that I endeavor to answer today. But I do hope to channel a little of Barbara and a lot of the Holy Spirit as we look at two other texts from the gospel of Matthew this morning and discern God’s truth even as it comes in two different voices.

Let us pray: *Extemporaneous prayer.*

We have before us this morning two passages from the gospel of Matthew, and both are relatively familiar words. The first comes just after the beatitudes in Matthew 5. “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 a 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.”

And then, a few paragraphs later in the very same sermon, Jesus says: Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them. Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites for they disfigure their faces to show others that they are fasting. But when you fast, wash your face so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret.”

As we struggle and strive to be faithful to the way of Christ, we cannot help but wonder, which is it? Let your good works shine before others or do your good works in secret? Shine? Or hide?

Perhaps the most memorable treatment of the call to be a shining city on a hill comes from the Puritan preacher and Governor John Winthrop. As he sailed across the Atlantic with others seeking religious freedom in the New World, he penned and delivered a now famous sermon, declaring that this new England would be as a city upon a hill, with the eyes of all people upon it. I doubt if Winthrop and his fellow travelers had any plans or hopes for revolution as they set sail

in 1630. Their dream at that time was not to found a new nation but to be a light for England, for the church, and for the world – a shining example of unity and prosperity borne out of mutual love.

Winthrop knew already that disparity between rich and poor could cause dissent among this band of settlers. He knew that the wealthy might feel themselves superior and more valuable than the poor. He knew that the founding of a new colony would prove difficult financially and that maintaining Christian ideals in the wake of peril would prove difficult spiritually and practically. The entire first part of his sermon deals specifically with practical guidelines for giving and loaning money once the ship lands and the new community is established. The greater the peril, Winthrop writes, the more we must walk “with more enlargement towards others and less respect towards ourselves and our own right.”<sup>1</sup>

So which is it? For John Winthrop, the answer is “Shine.”

But John Winthrop also quotes another great preacher, one whose word crosses our path today, too. The prophet Isaiah also writes to a people in peril. They, too, are on the brink of traversing to a new world. Only they will not journey by choice or with hopeful optimism. Their enemies are pressing against them from all sides. They are on the brink of attack and exile. “Why has the Lord not answered our cries for help,” they ask.

God challenges Isaiah to announce to the people their rebellion. They have fasted and worshipped. They have prayed and worn sackcloth. But they have also quarreled and served their own interest on their fast day. They have oppressed their workers and ignored the hungry. Like the hypocrites whom Jesus chides in Matthew’s gospel, they have performed their religious duties to be seen by God and others. But their hearts have not done justice, loved kindness, or walked in humility with God.

Is not this the fast that I choose, God proclaims through the prophet: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, then your light shall rise in the darkness.

So which is it? For the prophet Isaiah, the answer is neither to shine your good deeds nor to hide them. The answer is to “Get real.”

The answer to the tensions in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is neither more fasting nor less. It is not more prayer or less prayer; more church or less church. The answer is to get real – to bring more authenticity to our discipline, our prayers, our songs. John Winthrop told those early settlers that “that which the most in their churches maintain as truth in profession only, we must bring into familiar and constant practice.”<sup>2</sup> That which we profess, which we sing, and for which we pray we must bring into familiar and constant practice.

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<sup>1</sup> John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*. < <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html> >

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

John Winthrop's words, like Isaiah's words, were not for the good times only. They were most especially for the times of crisis and peril. We too are on the brink of, if not already living in a new world. Many of the values and practices that we thought were sure and certain no longer work. Personal relationships are forever changed by new communication technologies. Religious affiliation is rarely crucial to a person's identity. Diverse skin colors and languages are now the norm in most schools and cities. An unregulated market can no longer be trusted to provide prosperity and security for all people. Even the kinds of wars that we wage are different than ever before in history.

Times they are a changing'. This is a new world.

So which is it? Shall we let our good deeds shine like a city on a hill? Or shall we attend to our religious practices quietly?

The answer is both, for we cannot do one without the other. For it is in our quiet but familiar, constant practice of that which we profess that our light shall rise in the darkness. As we fast privately and share our food with the hungry, the Lord will satisfy our needs in these parched places. As we go into our closets to pray for the poor and go into the streets to cover the naked, we shall blossom like a watered garden. As we sing songs of hope in our hearts and raise our voices for justice in the neighborhood, we shall be rebuilt as that city on a hill, a light to the nations.

In closing, I want to let you know that some of our youth have made a special effort to get real – to bring some authenticity to – the practice of fasting this weekend. Not only did they agree not to eat any meals or snacks from Friday lunch until Saturday dinner; they also spent the day Saturday serving others and learning about hunger in our world. Saturday afternoon they did what many people do every day: they walked to the grocery store, bought with a meager budget the food they would cook to break their fast, and carried the groceries back to church. These youth, like the rest of us, will need encouragement and strong examples if this profession of faith is to become a familiar and constant practice. You can hear from them, encourage them, and learn from them in the Fellowship Hall after worship.

So which is it? Shine or hide? It can only be both and it cannot wait. The time for our good deeds of justice, kindness, and generosity to shine is not in some future time when life is certain and secure. It is not when "things get better" or when the economy picks up. If we hope to be a light shining in the darkness, a city on a hill, the time for our good deeds, both public and private is now. And whether we shine, hide, or both we do it in the knowledge that Christ is the light of the world that the darkness can never overcome. Thanks be to God.