

We're Doing it Wrong, February 5, 2023, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Isaiah 58.1-12; Psalm 112.1-10; 1 Corinthians 2.1-16; Matthew 5.13-20

“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.”

Prayer

We are now into the month of February. And February means something *different* for church people than the rest of the world. Rather than thinking about Valentine's Day and Mardi Gras, we're thinking about Vestry Season. Or maybe that's just me. But I know that I am definitely thinking about Vestry Season. Or, Annual General Meeting Time. This is the time of the year when you chart a course forward into the next year, and when you take the time to evaluate how things went *last* year.

So, with this is the back of my head as I looked at the readings for this morning, I came to a rather uncomfortable conclusion: we're doing it wrong. And, as these writings that we heard today are very old, perhaps I should modify that earlier statement by saying we're *still* doing it wrong. And, here's one more modification: as the guy who is up here at the front of the church most Sundays and standing in the pulpit most of the time, I bear the bulk of the responsibility: I am still doing it wrong.

That's going to take some unpacking.

I don't want you to think that this is one of those “fire and brimstone” sermons where I tell everyone how horrible they are so they feel awful and start thinking about hell. Actually, if anything, I have been *encouraged* by what I have seen in the last few months. I think things have been building. Growing. Developing. Faith has been deepening. And, since I am in Vestry recruiting mode, I have even been encouraged by people who are willing to step up and take on or continue helping to care for this place and this community. This is all good news. I am encouraged about St. Tim's and believe that we have a future, together.

The future emphasis of St. Tim's, however, will have to be different from where it is now.

As I said before, I bear the bulk of this burden. There are some things that I absolutely *love* about this job. And there are other things that I like and appreciate, and recognize as “important”. There is a lot that goes in to keeping a church running. But not all of it is equally important.

For starters, I like our worship service. I like the way that we have settled into something that is mostly the same, week after week, with some subtle changes to recognize changing seasons in the church calendar. I like that things *flow* well. And I like the way that the space is organized. I think that the space and the aesthetic of the church enhances and enables our worship. And I think that the worship itself is of high quality. We have gifted musicians, dedicated prayer leaders and readers. I pray nearly every week that our worship will be pleasing to God.

But that's where I've made my first mistake. It is so tempting and easy to get caught up in that. Not that worship is bad. Not that things should be messy or distracting. And certainly not that our worship shouldn't be beautiful (as I think it is). But that is what our first reading was all about. A people that were earnest for God in their following after the rituals. In keeping the fasts. In putting on a good "show". And then wondering why God wasn't showing up. Not that God isn't here—that's not what I mean at all. But God is not going to join us in our worship because we hold such a lovely Sunday service. That cannot be the focus.

But don't worry. That is not my only focus.

I also like to engage in intellectual conversations. We had such a great conversation at our last Youth Movie Night last weekend. We talked all about Artificial Intelligence and the creation of "life" and how we distinguish between what is alive and what it not. What is a "soul" and what does it mean to be created in the image of God rather than in the image of an earthly creator. We thought a lot. And we argued. And we left, or at least I left, with much more to think about.

I like thinking. I *really* like figuring stuff out for myself, especially complicated or challenging things. And God is complicated. Our faith is complex.

...but it doesn't need to be. That is what we learn from our second reading. Paul tells the Corinthians that he did not come to them with impressive words and worldly wisdom. Instead, his emphasis was on the cross of Christ, which we heard last week was "foolishness" to humans. Paul's goal was not to convince his audience of the truth of the gospel by logical arguments or compelling wisdom. The truth is in the power of God and the cross of Christ.

But it is the words of Jesus himself that are probably the most concerning. Right at the end of the gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples that, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." At first, we might think that the Pharisees and the scribes are poor examples—we should easily be able to exceed *their* righteousness, right? Jesus is constantly criticizing them and pointing out their hypocrisy. Exceeding them should be a piece of cake!

We might think that—until we look at it more closely. The Pharisees and the scribes were the *most* dedicated people of the day to the study and interpretation of scripture. They spent their entire *lives* reading and learning and teaching the words of scripture. They lived and breathed the word of God. And, what is the highlight of *my* week? Bible Study, of course! Spending time with other devoted followers of Jesus poring over the words of scripture together and trying our best to understand what they mean—and what they mean to us, today. I aspire to have the wisdom of those brilliant teachers who went before me. I seek to know the scriptures as well as those who have devoted so much of their lives to its study. And yet, even if I were to achieve that, at the very best I would be *matching* the Pharisees and the scribes, certainly not exceeding them or their righteousness.

I hope you see how I came to this difficult conclusion: we *are* doing it wrong. This is so much of the life of this church. And I'm not trying to shame anybody—except maybe myself. Because it feels like I may have lost sight of what is most important in the eyes of God.

We are now at the second week of Jesus making his way through the famous Sermon on the Mount. This is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the first recording we have in Matthew's Gospel of *what* Jesus was teaching. Last week Jesus started with the Beatitudes, and all the "blessed are you"s, encouraging his disciples to value their place in the world, even though they hadn't ascended to the heights of cultural admiration. What Jesus follows that up with is this week's reading: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Though Jesus' disciples are *not* "influencers", Jesus makes the point very early on in his sermon that *they are* difference makers in the world. Together, they change the world for everybody else. We all know about how powerful salt is in affecting the flavour of food—Jesus' disciples were the salt of the earth! They made this difference for everybody! And just in case that point wasn't clear enough, Jesus goes on to tell them that they are the light of the world! And we all know about how important light is: if doesn't change anything that is there already, but it helps us to see, helps us to recognize what is right in front of us, and treat what is in our life appropriately, having recognized its role.

"Nobody lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket, but puts it on a lampstand so that it can give light to the whole house." The light is to be seen. To illuminate the things that are. And Jesus' disciples collectively *are* that light of the world.

As followers of Jesus, we too are called to be "salt and light" to the world. And we are trying! There are times, though, when it seems like so much effort is put into all of those things I've already mentioned. Those things which are *part* of what happens at church, but shouldn't become the focus. Shouldn't take away from what it *really* means to be disciples of Christ. And, looking at it now, even though I can be very enthusiastic about planning services and selecting music and getting into theological debates and diving into the scriptures, it sometimes seems as though this light, burning brightly as it is, is being hidden away. As though these great things that are happening are being sheltered from the world—like the lamp is being put under a basket. We're doing it wrong—there must be a better approach.

But before any of us get any crazy ideas about what Jesus is asking us to do, we need to go back to what he says in the sermon on the mount. Jesus is not teaching something new; "I'm not giving you *new* rules," he says. "I'm not throwing away the old law and giving you something different. The law is still valid. It is still good. But my new teachings will help to enhance the law. To bring it to fruition. To its fulfilment." The law already existed—it just needed to be more fully realized.

So, how are we to be disciples of Christ today? How are we to be salt and light for the world? If we have been doing it wrong, how do we do it right? For this, we turn back to Isaiah:

"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is 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?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn."