

Epiphany 5/A
5 February 2023

Isaiah 58:1-9a, [9b-12]; Psalm 112:1-9, (10); 1 Corinthians 2:1-12, [13-16]; Matthew 5:13-20

Where are we? Who are we? Why are we here? What are we meant to be doing? How are we to go about this thing we call life? These are the elemental questions that humans have been pondering for thousands of years. These, says Huston Smith in his classic book, *The World's Religions*, are the basic questions that form the basis of all human religious yearnings.

There are many voices surrounding us on all sides claiming to answer these questions for us – in effect telling us what to do. Yet, we pray this morning: “Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.” We seek freedom and liberty and abundance, yet most of us remain enslaved, bonded to three verbs, as Evelyn Underhill explains in *The Spiritual Life*: “to Want, to Have, and to Do. Craving, clutching, and fussing,” she writes, “on the material, political, social, emotional, intellectual – even on the religious – plane, we are kept in perpetual unrest: forgetting that none of these verbs have any ultimate significance, except so far as they are transcended by and included in, the fundamental verb, to Be: and that Being, not wanting, having and doing, is the essence of a spiritual life”.

We seek to know the essence of our Being – what it means to be truly human. Jesus offers what we mistakenly believe to be metaphors: we are salt and light – and as such, we are capable of fulfilling all that God requires of us as laid out in commandments and reminders from prophets. Prophets, who were and are poets.

Poetic prophets, like Isaiah, who helps us to imagine what it really means to observe a fast: “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? 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, and your healing shall spring up quickly... Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.”

Some five hundred years later, Jesus confirms that our light, the light of Christ, the light of God’s purpose, shines brightest when we do just these things. This is the essence of our Being. This is why we are here in a world in desperate need of more light. This is how to fulfill our Being light: by reconciliation. By striving for justice and peace and dignity for all people – not some people, not most, or a lot of people, but all people. As the sign hanging in front of the Quaker Meeting House just up the street says: Love Thy Neighbor – no exceptions.

This is what it means to be the salt of the earth. Another poet of our age, May Sarton writes in her poem, *In Time Like Air*:

Consider the mysterious salt:
 In water it must disappear.
 It has no self. It knows no fault.
 Not even sight may apprehend it.
 No one may gather it or spend it.
 It is dissolved and everywhere.

But, out of water into air,
 It must resolve into a presence,
 Precise and tangible and here.
 Faultlessly pure, faultlessly white,
 It crystallizes in our sight
 And has defined itself to essence.

She goes on to say that Love is just as mysterious. Jesus is calling us to be Love like salt. Love is to make up the very essence of who we are and why we are here. We come from Love, we return to Love, and Love is all around. Should we forget this elemental essence of our existence, we are made up of a mixture of saltwater and stardust – a very mixture of light and salt. Funny how the ancient wisdom of Isaiah and Jesus suddenly coalesces with the discovery of our origins in science!

The Apostle Paul calls us to consider what it means to be “truly human” in his Corinthian correspondence: “We speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.’”

Yet, the “rulers of this age” continue to keep us busy Wanting, Having, and Doing; craving, clutching and fussing “on the material, political, social, emotional, intellectual – even on the religious – plane,” kept in perpetual unrest. The secret and hidden wisdom of God calls us to recall the essence of life, the essence of our being made of salt and stardust, to remind us where we come from, where we are going, and what we are meant to be doing – if anything at all – which all revolve around Love – restoring justice, peace and dignity for all people in a world that too often wants us to believe it is every man, woman, and child for themselves. This is why Underhill calls us to stop all else and take time to simply Be – for it is in taking time to recollect the essence of being truly human that we are set free to be who we are meant to be and remember what we are meant to be doing.

The elements of creation, like salt, water, light, and stardust – acts of kindness and love for all creatures great and small – define the very essence of who we are and whose we are, which Jesus sums up in just a few words about salt and light. When we live lives of justice, peace, and dignity for all people and all of creation, says the poet Isaiah, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.”

There is healing from all that seeks to keep us in a state of perpetual unrest. The prophet imagines what that looks like. The apostle calls us to remember what it means to be truly human. Jesus reminds us what it means to be the salt of the earth, and the light that shines upon others so that they might join us in giving all glory to God – God, whose property is always to have mercy, who sets us free and gives us the liberty of that abundant life made known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.