

Joseph Alaak
02/09/2020

2nd Sermon @ 5:00 PM

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany Year A

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

Title: Our faithfulness to God and generosity for others are virtues God expected of us.

And luckily in today's readings, we are given multiple choices, therefore, the game is ours, either to choose a fasting of our own pleasure or to choose a true fasting which God expects our faithfulness, and generosity to others. This reading in Isaiah felt very heavy, when I read it, all I was getting was the terrible announcement that people are rebellion against God, how the sins of the house of Jacob were outraged. And that people seek the Lord day after day yet God does not answer because they follow their own wills. These loud voices and words penetrate straight to the bone that it feels like pinch right to the bone; these what Isaiah said as act of pretending to practice righteousness. At one point, his voice was identified as a warning to the people of Israel. Warning them how their fasting was not acceptable to God but still they seek God. Isaiah said people fast to serve their own egos, that they fast to only draw quarrels and fights; and these make God hide ears. On the encounter, I imagine how difficult it must have been for the Israelist to comprehend this reading and messages.

But then, as I continue reading, I found some grace in it, this is a fasting chosen by God. Isaiah's call comes with some positive illustrations for new directions people should follow to true fasting God chose. At this point I felt welcome and I began to breathe in fresh air. He recommended that in order to fast according to the true fasting orders; God wants us “to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every

yoke”. Thus instead, we should be humble, we should seek to share our bread with the hungry, to clothe the naked and to be kind to the homeless. Therefore, to talk about true fasting, where God wants us to share and be kind to others.

So let me share with you a brief story about it, the moment I believed I felt the impacts of true fasting shined a light on me. This is the moment when we were really looking for support of food, medicine and the United Nations High Commission for Refugee showup for our rescues. This Organization has compelling life-saving aspirations functions around the world which initiate related feelings of today readings in Isaiah and the gospel of Matthew hold inside me, and what these readings teach us.

To begin with, the war in 1987 in Sudan, forced thousands of Sudanese to take unfamiliar roads to Ethiopia, a long foot journey with no protection. As we were forcefully driven off the villages, it happened we carried only a little food on our heads. And luckily it was the dry season so walking was convenient but at the same time, this added effect of enduring scorching sun heat of Sudan. However, the journey was so long that all the food we carried finished before reaching the destination. By the time we arrived at the destination, we had hoped that we would find food, but instead we found that it was a typical forest with only one small building standing. And imagine people would tell you this is where you will stay...and your mind went spinning...Of course, with no exception, we settled under the trees near the river bank, and waited for The Heavenly God to show up. We would wake up every morning and look around and the same forest we see everyday surrounding us.

Few days later, Yes God did show up in the person of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. And it was like waking up at dawn on a beautiful spring morning .

That day was full of hope and smiles and joy. And I remember those United Nations officers who visited us, even though they do not speak a single word in the Sudanese language; they knew how their visited shine light; the appreciation they received from the crowds, I mean the body language itself expresses reality.

And I must confess that my first English statement I learned was “welcome the United Nations High Commission for Refuge”. Because we were blessed for few individuals who can speak and write English. These individuals were able to write the name in abbreviation UNHCR on the board and taught us to say it. The sign boards were for welcoming and expression of gratitude. On the scene, these UNHCR officers promised to bring helping hands. And yes they kept their promise and a few days later, the food arrived from Addis Ababa with the UNHCR logo on top of the vehicles. Also, the grace was extended when we began our first English lessons under the trees. Now I understand what motivated the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee to visit us. And this sometimes makes me feel like I should say owe to myself! The thought that I should practice more generosity, and appreciative to others, and to involved in a faithful mission, because from the very first place, when my light almost went off, someone faithful showup with candle light, when I was naked, someone faithful people show up to cloth me, When I was hungry, someone faithful showup and gave me food to eat.

As I was reading the church father Caesarius of Arles, I was connected to his wisdom. His view for, “ if we carefully heed the fact that Christ hungers in the person of the poor”, he said “beloved, it will be profitable for us”... and he continues to invite people as he elaborated his view, and said “listen and see, a coin and a kingdom” and he said “You give the poor a coin and receive a kingdom from Christ; you bestow a mouthful and are given eternal life; you offer

clothes, and Christ grants you the forgiveness of your sins” Sermons 25.2”. At first I thought he simply wanted us to choose, but instead he asked for our judgement and comparison.

His view is connected with the gospel message, and I wondered if Jesus was being polite or being difficult on his disciples when he said these: “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot”. The use of the double metaphoric application, salt and light in one setting passage, make adoring description, at the same time a rare demand.

Talking about human life, I like to look at the commentary by Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, they suggested that in human life “nothing is more useful than the salt and sunshine” (Longman, Garland. P. 168). And many of us would agree with them because it is rather common sense to think about the usefulness of salt and light, because we value them very well in our daily life for various reasons. Also, I thought liberty found in these readings which allows us to express our saltiness and light through building kind relationships with others as a grace.

But sometimes as Christians our effectiveness may be overshadowed by our own desires, and I can confess that with reality of life; it's almost impossible not to lose effectiveness unless by the grace God which gives us inward faith. And today, I wondered, if Jesus would come and say to us, thanks so much for following my command, and we would say, that's alright. Anytime, please. Now, this statement seems obvious to me as I always heard many people expressing their gratitudes and acceptance in these ways. But as Christians, don't we feel the difficulty of doing Jesus commands because we are not “set free from the bondage of sins?”.

So Jesus is encouraging us to take this little light and make it shine. He said, “ let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”. When we abide by these virtues, God is ready, and waiting to save us from the great force of the bondage of our own desires.

Also, let us remember that God has already given us the new names, because God expects our faithfulness and humble and generosity to one another, and by doing so, we become the salt and light of the world. So, considering the current moment in our lives and all the things which are happening, we hear around us. Our faithfulness to God matters a lot. Therefore, I like to invite you to think about one thing, and maybe name it in your heart. (*****) This one thing you have been thinking of is called salt or light. And I don't, suppose you could tell me in this brief discussion to share in your thoughts, so, let me ask,

- In your spiritual life; how do you practice this one thing in your true fasting?
- In your spiritual life; how do you weigh this one thing as the taste of your saltiness?
- In your spiritual life; how do you shine this one thing as your light?

In our spiritual life, dear beloved, let us hold fast to those elements that define us as the salt and the light, whether, it's a work of stewardship, or charity, sharing our bread with hungry, or covering the naked or welcoming the poor, and many. Whatever it might be in our lives that make us salt and light of the world, beloved don't we let it go. Our gratitude to God should be seen in our actions.

Bibliography

Caesarius, and Mary Magdeleine Mueller. *Sermons*. Vol. Volume Iii, (187-238) /. The Fathers of the Church : A New Translation, V. 66. INSERT-MISSING-SERVICE-NAME. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press in association with Consortium Press, 2004. INSERT-MISSING-URL.

Longman, Tremper, and David E Garland. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Rev.ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006.

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