

"For the Benefit of the Whole World"

"Hold Jesus Close to Your Heart"

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Isaiah 9:2, 42:6; Matthew 13:33; John 8:12

As is probably obvious, today's first Gospel lesson is a repeat from last week. When I first conceived of Matthew 13:33 for last week's sermon I worried a bit about whether there was enough there from which to flesh out a whole sermon. I mentioned last week the observation that this single verse contains not a single word or suggestion as to application. It thus became apparent that finding and making proper application might also be something of a challenge. Let us not forget that proper application can be quite tricky! It is not only preachers who worry about applications that don't actually apply. Most of us, I would guess, have seen and heard any number of mis-applications. Thus, the pressure is really put upon us all to let Scripture guide and direct us.

I remember one time being as surprised as I was perplexed to learn that part of the LORD's problem with the Israelites is that the Israelites, even when they were being true and faithful in terms of worshiping the LORD alone, and observing all the rules, rites, and rituals prescribed for them, they nevertheless were failing in another realm of their calling as the "special people of God". In fact, this failing was not a minor failing but a major failing. It is imperative, when considering the calling to which the Israelites had been called, to not miss, gloss over, or misunderstand the significance of the two verses I selected from Isaiah. These verses are critical if we are to understand God's purpose and plan not only for their lives but ours as well. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." (Isaiah 9:2, NIV) "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles." (Isaiah 42:6, NIV) A light for the Gentiles is what the Israelites were called to be. Jesus said that he, himself, was that light. And by extension and application, as we who are disciples of Jesus are the extension of Jesus himself, we are that light to the Gentiles - those who don't know Christ.

Judaism lived a long time with the misunderstanding of one key purpose God had for their lives and their existence. They indeed were a chosen people, the precious people of God! They were precious in his sight! They were the apple of God's eye! They were a chosen race, the chosen ones! That being said, Judaism held the erroneous belief that they existed primarily to just worship God and be recipients of God's blessings. This belief rested on a foundation of "me, myself, and I", whether in terms of the individual or Israel as a nation. They hadn't caught on to the idea that God's personal desire and plans for their existence and lives was that they would be a conduit through which other nations would come to know and love God, too.

Isaiah had the arduous, and indeed dangerous, task of conveying the LORD's message to the people that, yes, they had been and were to be the recipients of God's many blessings. But Isaiah also had the assignment of telling them something they did NOT want to hear - that their existence was not merely for their own sake, but for something far more grand and far beyond themselves. In terms evangelical Christianity uses today, they were to be evangelists,

followers and devotees of the LORD God of Israel. They were to be evangelists who were to SHARE WITH THE WORLD the light and good news of God's love, ways, and designs for every human community the world over. The world of course needed spiritual light in those days. However, let me suggest that the world then was no more or less dark than it is today. It was only different in other ways. Actually, our 2 verses from Isaiah anticipate the day Jesus Christ would say, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12, NIV)

We should remember Jesus saying, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16, NIV)

These verses from Matthew are of course found in his famous Sermon on the Mount. The setting and context is telling. "Now when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach [all of] them, saying, "....." Again, the context and setting of this event involves whole crowds of people, not just Jesus' disciples.

Israel had gotten the crazy notion, of which they stubbornly refused to be disabused, that the LORD love and cared almost exclusively for them. It was difficult for them to fathom God's love for the other nations and peoples around them. Isaiah was the LORD's instrument and mouthpiece trying to tell them that they were stubbornly wrong on this issue. God's love was for all the nations and peoples of the world.

It is interesting that at the close of yesterday's Presbytery meeting, we were blessed to listen to a particularly interesting, and profound, rendition of the song Amazing Grace. The audio visual presentation involved individual phrases of that powerful hymn sung by Christian individuals around the world from 50 nations. We heard one segment of a verse in English, then the next segment in another language, then the next segment in another language, then the next segment in another language, etc., etc. As we listened to the particular phrase sung in the particular language we also saw the words on the screen as it would appear written in that particular language. In the end, 50 nations, 50 languages, each contributed to the singing of the single song that is arguably one of the most beloved hymns of Christendom. Early into this beloved hymn, we began to hear multiple languages being used simultaneously. I can only guess but, toward the end, we might have been listening to as many as half a dozen of different languages simultaneously. In case you're wondering, it was not as distracting as one might think. The light of Jesus was being expressed simultaneously in that particular rendition by nations from all around the globe.

It is not happenstance that these two verses from Isaiah are found regularly in the Advent season line up. Isaiah 9:2 is followed shortly thereafter with verse 6 which says most beautifully in the King James and New King James, "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called wonderful, Counselor, Mighty

God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." This is indeed an Advent theme but surely it should not be confined only to Advent.

As a side bar note, this should be a caution and a word in advance of Advent lest we misconstrue what Advent is all about, at least in its over all theme, focus, and emphasis. Advent is not merely or solely about us. It is equally about sharing the love of God in Christ Jesus with others. It is not primarily about presents and trappings. However properly we employ them, they should never take on a primary roll or focus. Everything is to point to and lend itself to the greater divine purpose and message - the love of God for the world. Israel didn't seem to get it right. But lest we point fingers, let us consider, and then confess, that we don't always get it right either. But, I digress slightly.

There is the story of the preacher who was confronted by a person who, upon learning of the pastor's love for the United States of America, approached the pastor with a few questions that troubled him. "Pastor, I know you love God. That is well known. But, I find it a bit troubling that you seem to love our country. Isn't that a divided loyalty? Our nation, as I'm sure you know, is fraught with problems, issues, and failures. Do you really love our country?" With little hesitation the pastor responded, "Yes, I love our country. But in a certain way and to a certain extent. Actually, my deeper love is for the ethics and ideals upon which our country was founded and still, at least in theory, exists. It is important to love, live, and strive for the ideal, regardless of where we are at a given moment. 'Love our ideals and not our imperfections,' I always say." "But," the fellow offered in response, "We have so many different religions in this country, and we have so many different socio-economic backgrounds, and so many different religions living within the borders of our nation, how can you, I, or anyone know what are the right and proper ethics and ideals?" "That," replied the pastor, "is a most excellent question, and of which there is a perfect and trustworthy answer. God has revealed it to us in the Judao-Christian Scriptures, from Genesis through Revelation. You see, the ethics and values God has in mind for every human society is found in the Scriptures, particularly in terms of what we know as the Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue. Ancient Israel was supposed to receive but also convey these commandments and other laws from God regarding human behavior and ethics to the societies and peoples around them. But they did a pretty poor job of it. We Christians of today have the same calling. Some, however, think we're doing a better job than the Israelites did, but others are not so sure. For me, the jury is still out on that one. The ultimate point is that God wants our country, this United States of America, to have and live with the benefit of the knowledge and ethics he wills for all of mankind. It is not by coincidence or without practical meaning and application that the Ten Commandments were inscribed in stone in a number of federal buildings. That's why I love our country, though in part, but also why I continue to do my part in having it come more fully into being as we go along. We are to be God's light in a dark world. We are to be God's salt in God's world to give good taste and wholesomeness to our fellow citizens."

Indeed, as suggested by this story, if our world is increasingly falling apart and thus growing more dark and losing our flavor and foundation, we need more

light not less, more salt of taste and preservation, not less. We need our voices heard, not have our voices silenced. We need to get out and act, not allow ourselves to be forced into retreat, to let our light shine and allow ourselves to be closeted. This is the tie-in to this morning's Gospel lesson from Matthew and our sermon from last week - the yeast that permeates and affects everything it touches or is injected into.

It is interesting that Jesus takes the common metaphor - yeast - and uses it in a manner diametrically opposed to the typical use. "Yeast" is typically used as a metaphor for "sin", a metaphor for that which is evil but which surely can and will grow exponentially if left unchecked. "Be careful," Jesus said to [his disciples.] "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (Matt 16:6, NIV) Jesus was referring to the pomposity, smugness, hypocrisy, the lack of concern for the struggling common person, and their reliance on their own righteousness and adherence to the law. In other words, their "sin".

The Apostle Paul, once a self-righteous Pharisee in his own right, finally realized what the yeast metaphor was all about. Paul, himself a former Pharisee, used the yeast metaphor in a letter to the church at Corinth. The church was in the middle of a crisis over a particular problem. A certain man was living with his father's wife - hardly a moral living arrangement. Certainly there were some who objected to the sexual immorality of one of their members, but others, apparently, were not so bothered. In fact, some were even proud of the man seemingly for his progressive and metropolitan way of thinking. He and others, it seems, were on the vanguard of ideology and theological thinking. They were on the cutting edge of cultural, religious, and sexual evolution! Paul, on the other hand was incredulous and rejected in the strongest of terms their view. "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast-- as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." (1 Cor 5:6-7, NIV) Paul knew that if this sin and sinful lifestyle was not rejected, it would grow like any cancer does and infect the whole body of Christ.

But, conversely, Jesus used the yeast metaphor in a positive, potentially life-giving sense. As the yeast of sin can and indeed will grow as I just described, the yeast that is the good will and ethics of God will also grow and spread if only we put it into play. Everything we learn from God's word, everything we learn from the examples of Jesus, everything we learn from the examples of Jesus' disciples (both positive and negative), everything we learn from the examples of the "precious people of God" we know as the Israelites, are to be put into play not simply here in our church, or simply in our homes, or simply in our local community, but in every place and venue God gives us opportunity.

The coming election cycle and the coming seating of a Supreme Court judge are a couple critical opportunities for us to be a light unto the Gentiles. Let us not be short-sighted. The days of Isaiah came a long time after the God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments - some 700 years by one calculation. 7 centuries is a long time, is it not? This year will be over before we know it. Let us make our voices heard. May we be the yeast spoken of in Matthew's Gospel.

May the yeast that is sin be cast out. Conversely, may we, as the yeast of Christ unto the world, leaven our world. Crucial opportunities are close at hand.

And yet, application this morning is directed not only towards political matters. It also is directed, briefly, in a different direction. I will tie it in in a moment with the Lord's Supper. As a word in regard to the Lord's Supper, for those who are not worshiping with us here on site, and who thus do not have at hand the elements of Communion, my prayer is that you will envision in your mind and your heart a time you previously received the physical elements. Even more than that, imagine now, with your eyes closed, that you, at his moment, are holding the elements of Communion - the bread and then the grape juice. Think of the way the love of God thus presented grips your heart and offers a true sense of forgiveness, hope, and courage. And lastly, please know we all regret that some of you are not able to be here physically. Should you desire and request it, I will be most pleased to bring the Sacrament to you at your home.

As many of us know, Facebook has taken on an incredible role in the life of our nation. Facebook is concerned with virtually everything one can imagine. While it is not typical, Facebook is a place where conversations happen about ethics and morals. Facebook is a place where conversations happen about our testimonies and our faith in Jesus. While it probably is not typical, our testimonies can at times bring people to the point of considering becoming a disciple of Jesus. I know of one particular instance where such a possibility exists. If such a situation comes to you, not only pray for the person considering such a monumental life-saving development but find someone to pray with you. Think of your Baptism. Think of the Lord's Supper you hold close to your spiritual, or even physical, heart on days such as this.

Today, as we receive the Lord's Supper, during the brief musical interlude, hold the elements close to your heart physically. With your eyes closed for the brief moment, consider the love God has for you and then consider the love God has for the world. It is rich. It is real. It is powerful. It is there to be had. It is not only for Advent that we have the Light of the world in our hands. Hold Jesus close to you always and forever. But also hold him out to the world to receive. Amen.