

5 EPIPHANY FEBRUARY 6, 2011 CYCLE "A"

TITLE: I HAVE NOT COME TO DESTROY BUT TO FULFILL

**READINGS: Isa. 58:1-9a[9b-12], Ps. 112:1-9[10], 1 Cor. 2:1-12[13-16],
Matt. 5:13-20**

Aunt Martha, who was in her nineties, was growing quite deaf. The family tried to interest her in a hearing aid, but to no avail. Aunt Martha vetoed the idea completely explaining: "I'm 93 years old, and I've heard enough!" Well no matter how old you are you haven't heard enough until you have heard the sermon I'm about to give!

Just look at our first reading today. Isaiah comes on with an outburst. He shouts out to the Israelites that they are sinners and he points out to them that they are not only sinners but they deceive themselves by pretending to live by faith, they want others to see them as righteous, but actually are not. You are a community, he says, that lives out its faith "as if you were a nation that practiced righteousness." Isa.5d8:2b.

Does that sound familiar? It should. We have just heard something very similar in the words of Jesus in today's Gospel pericope. It is still part of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and he is telling his special disciples, "You are the salt of the earth" you are my special ones. You are my representatives; you are to set the example for all to follow, because you are to imitate me. You are not only good, but are to be very good. Then he goes on, "But if 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." Matt. 5:13. Then he says, "You are the light of the world." Don't hide it under a bushel basket, but let it shine for all to see. You are my image in the world. Live up to it.

See the connection with our first reading? Jesus points out the scribes and the Pharisees who were deceivers of his day. They were the fundamentalists of Jesus' day. They taught that God could be reduced to fundamental laws and beliefs. Observe the laws and you were home free, so to speak. But, of course, they themselves were a cut above the law and as Jesus points out many times, simply deceived others, placed the burdens on them and did nothing themselves.

“Do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” Matt.23:3-4. It reminds me of the period of history in the church just prior to Luther and the reformers. Christians were burdened with endless laws and rules and were obligated to observe them to earn their way to salvation. Theologians would argue how many angels were able to stand on the head of a pin and pretend such arguments weren't senseless and stupid. Luther, when he traveled to Rome as a representative of the Augustinian community, paid the required amount, and then began climbing the “Sancta Scala” the sacred steps on his knees reciting the Lord's Prayer on each step. Looking around at the poor, the crippled, bleeding from their knees, he knew God would never require such suffering from the people he loved in order to earn a spot in heaven.

What had happened with both the Pharisees and the religious leaders of Martin Luther's day was the eternal temptation of religion by those who were in positions of authority and power: to turn what God intends as a means to an end, what God intends as a gift into a burden, what God intends to bless into what curses. If God is viewed as a Law-Giver, a Law-Enforcer and Judge, then our life will consist of learning the laws, teaching the laws, enforcing the laws, judging those who break the laws and punishing the guilty. And in addition, we Christians who are in positions of respect and authority or who are looked up to by others are to be the “Salt of the earth” and “The light of the world.” But we can become complacent, over confident, arrogant and, as Isaiah says, those with deceptive righteousness. That is the time we lose our taste, lose our Christian illumination. So ask yourself: Do I still have my Christian saltiness? Do I truly enlighten others with the light of Jesus Christ?

Jesus tells his disciples, I have not come to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them. The law, as Paul reminds us, accuses us of sin and is important for us. But Jesus came to do what the law couldn't do – save us from our sins, to teach us true righteousness and make us genuine disciples. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matt.5:20. He is telling us that we do not need to justify ourselves by obeying a list of laws, but we are dependent upon God's grace. Keeping laws and rules is not the thing that makes us truly righteous. We are made righteous by God's forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus. It is a free gift we receive by faith. We become children of God when we place our faith in him. It is then that our righteousness exceeds that of the pretenders, the scribes and Pharisees as Jesus

assures us, and we receive the invitation to enter his kingdom. We need only remember the price Jesus paid.

Henry Nouwen tells the story of a family he knew in Paraguay. The father, a doctor, whose Christian righteousness certainly exceeded that of the scribes and the Pharisees, spoke out against the military regime there and its human rights abuses. Local police took their revenge on him by arresting his teenage son and torturing him to death. The father responded with the most powerful protest imaginable. At the funeral, the father displayed his son's body as he had found it in the jail; naked, scarred from the electric shocks and cigarette burns and beatings. All the villagers filed past the corpse, which lay not in a coffin but on the blood-soaked mattress from the prison. Is that not what God did at Calvary? He laid it all out there for all to see the price that must be paid for humanity.

It certainly does matter what kind of righteousness we practice. It matters to people we love. It matters to those who look to us for Christian example. It certainly matters to God. Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. **Amen.**

Pastor Barney