



Friction



The Collect

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; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*



First Reading *Isaiah 58:1-9a*

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness

and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose,

a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,

and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,

a day acceptable to the Lord?

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;

your vindicator shall go before you,

the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;

you shall cry for help,

and he will say, Here I am.



The Epistle *1 Corinthians 2:1-12*

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But 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"—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

Gospel *Matthew 5:13-20*

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; 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. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.



In a few days time, I and a group of forty or so pilgrims will leave Atlanta for the holy land. We will go for different reasons. Some to study history. Others to embark on an internal journey. There will be those who are fascinated by the interweaving strands of culture and the sometimes clashing identities of politics and religion. Yet all of us will come back with a great many photographs.

Of the stupendous number of images that I captured when there last year, one of my favorites is from the Mount of Olives looking over the old city of Jerusalem on the hill across the way. The golden dome of the Al-Aqsa Mosque dominates the skyline almost any way you look at it. From where we were standing, it was possible to capture a view of the dome of the mosque beneath a run of barbed wire that criss-crossed a wall in front of us, marking out as everywhere else, where to go and where not to. Beauty and danger. Wonder and fear. It's the land of Israel all over; a place of contradiction if ever there was one.



Between where we stood and the old city walls were the tombs of Jerusalem's dead. One cemetery for Jews, another for Muslims, and one on Mt Zion for the Christians. Even in death, or perhaps especially in death, space is contested. As Phil Cousineau, the doyen of the modern pilgrim's way, says, to go on pilgrimage is to enter into a contested space by its very nature. Cousineau calls the pilgrimage '*the journey that we cannot Not take*'. It is the journey you take '*To remember the mysteries you forgot at home*'.

The passage we hear in Matthew's gospel today has a similar point to make. It is because we are to be those who will not hide the light of the world behind a bushel basket, but put it up on a lampstand, that we must continue to work on remembering that which we so easily forget. For the light we are to illuminate creation with is not of our own luminosity but Christ's light that shines through us. And that is a light, a mystery, although one we have always carried with us, that we so often neglect to be mindful of.



And so, we go on pilgrimage. To remember the mystery that is the light of Christ is why we journey, why we go on pilgrimage - whether to Jerusalem or to the grocery store - in the hopes that the movement will stir us out of our spiritual slumber. At its best, that is why we come to church too. You are seated here on these unreasonably hard wooden benches, not to long for the comforts you have at home, but to recall the mystery, the wonder, the vision for life that without the journey you would still remain forgetful of. We come to hear God speak into our lives the deeper soundings that our search for meaning could not uncover by itself. We come here to move and be moved.

Yet, movement requires friction. You won't make your way across the valley from the Mount of Olives, from Gethsemane, the place where Jesus felt the intensity of God's grace and the world's sin, and on to Jerusalem, the city on the hill, until you feel your own friction, as Jesus felt his own. One of the elements of returning to the scriptures each week in places like this one is that they remind us that we belong to a tradition that prizes friction highly. Biblical scholars call it the prophetic writings, and each year the



lectionary, the cycle of readings the church lays out to be read on Sunday through the church year, gives us a taste of the great prophetic voices of Jeremiah and Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. They are voices that are intended to grate with our own. If we let the words sink in, they should in some way or other unsettle us.

Take Isaiah from this today's prophetic text. It becomes immediately clear that Isaiah was good with friction. "*Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?*" Isaiah's concerns appear not to be the concerns of the people he is addressing: '*to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house*'. Instead, those whom Isaiah admonishes apparently serve their own interests and oppress their workers, quarreling and fighting thus rendering their fast, their religious expressions of piety void.



The context for this part of the book, sometimes called Third Isaiah, is significant, for it is believed that this section was composed not when the people were struggling out in exile but when they had been restored to their homeland, when they had made their pilgrimage back to Jerusalem, yet had seemingly so quickly forgotten the hardship of their forebears in exile. Their relative comfort made them amnesic for the mystery of grace. Comfort will do that for you, every time, if you let it, mostly because when we get comfortable, when we have more than we need, we sink into place and forget our need for movement.

Similarly, the religious life, which is what we are currently and collectively engaging in right now, will not do us any good if there is no traction for the body to move by. A faithful life, on the other hand, knows that it needs to be prodded and pushed, cajoled into action more often than not.



For Jesus' first followers, that was the point of the law. It is easy for us to dismiss the ministry of the Pharisees, conditioned as we have been to see them as a singular whole, an entire category of religious people whose only intention is to waylay the people of God. Christianity has practiced a category error, a kind of ecclesiastical 'racism' toward the Pharisees in its propagated reading of scripture that is neither accurate nor justified.

Pharisees were lay people, who unlike the ordained Sadducees, believed that the Law of the Lord was both written in the Torah and spoken to the people, and so a living thing. Furthermore, the reason why we meet the Pharisees in so many of Jesus' encounters in the gospels is because they were dispersed, away from the Temple making the case in the local communities for how God was still speaking into the lives of the people. In other words, the Pharisees, not dissimilar to their prophetic forebears, were agents of friction. They saw it as their mission to get the people on the move, a people beyond Jerusalem and its Temple who were largely disconnected from cultic religious life. Jesus proclaims the ongoing significance of the law in



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our gospel today in recognition of that fact, yet offers a different orientation to it: not to perfect adherence to the letter of the law, but to live a life where we are changed by the author of the law, God, manifest in Jesus himself.

Jesus, as Isaiah before him, was speaking to the point of tension, to the place where the people might be moved on from their self-centered inertia. So what about you? What is keeping you stuck to your spot? It's a question only you can answer, but essential to address if you are to recover the sight that has been lost to the blindness of self-sufficiency in this life. We are made to be movers toward grace. To be pilgrims who know that without the journey we shallow out. Where will you find your point of tension, your contested space that will give your growth the momentum it needs to go deeper once more?



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The beauty of it all, of this life of faithfulness in Christ Jesus, is that we don't have to board a plane to be on the move. Sometimes the distance we need to travel is as small as crossing over to the other side of the aisle, or of town, or even of our homes. Christ's light living in us is a given for our pilgrim's way. To see it, to touch it, to know it, however, requires for us to get up, stumble forward, and feel the lightness of grace when we remember that movement was what we were made for all along.

Amen.