

“On Salt, Light, and Heart-Work”

A sermon preached at the First Congregational Church of Camden, UCC

9 February 2020

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Isaiah 58. 1 – 12; Matt. 5. 13 – 20

with excerpts from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987)

“You are salt to the world. . . . You are light for all the world. Like the lamp, you must let your light shine among others, so that, when they see the good you do, they may give praise to your God in heaven.”

When the next prophet comes, I do hope he’ll be polite about it. You know, the forgiving type, one willing to look beyond our foibles and see our good intentions. I hope he’ll be the sort who will understand that we did our level best, despite all our failings. Perhaps he’ll have the sweet and forgiving demeanor of my grandmother, an Old School German always quick with a gentle laugh and delighted to see me, no matter what kind of mischief I’d been up to with my childhood pranks. She’d always look past my foolishness to see the dearness in me she hoped might grow. Don’t you want to meet that kind of prophet, too? One who would first sit down and listen to your story—skipping over the bad parts—and lavish you with praise? One whose first word would always be one of encouragement, only then turning to offer a bit of needed common-sense advice to help us improve our ways.

No such luck, of course. Prophets aren’t generally like this. They keep pointing to the awkward truths and the inconvenient conflicts of life. They’re not much interested in our “religion,” refusing our moral equivocations and exposing what we’re really up to once we leave church and turn to face the real world with all its difficulties.

The ancient prophet Isaiah, for one, is not the sort you’d want to meet over a pint at the Drouthy Bear. If we were to do so, he would have little time for small talk, calling us perhaps to join him in “shout[ing] aloud without restraint,” as we heard him put it in this morning’s text. He might well shrug off our comments about the winter weather, insisting we should spend our time with more important matters—like “lifting up [our] voice like a trumpet” in order to “declare to the people their transgression.” Something quite different from the State of the Union address we heard earlier this week. No, his words ring avoid vapid praise, ringing with the stern note of warning and judgment: “Woe be to you” would be the general tone. Well, perhaps you are thinking: this is not what you’d hoped to hear on a pleasant

winter's Sunday morning. Couldn't it be a bit gentler, after all? With more affirmation and encouragement?

Well, no. Isaiah paints a dim picture of our capacity, as humans, to avoid doing what is right, preferring the posture of acceptable behavior to the more radical demands of faithfulness—here, in terms of what a proper fast means, which has nothing to do with posturing and pretending. His question is relentless: what kind of fast would be acceptable to the Lord? When we hear the list, we know him to be right, of course:

Is it not sharing your food with the hungry,
taking the homeless poor into your house,
clothing the naked when you meet them,
and never evading a duty to your kinsfolk?

We know this would be a good thing to do. But, well, we try our best, and do accomplish good things—hoping, with the prophet, not to “evade a duty to [our] kinsfolk.” But what of those words of Jesus we also heard, when he told his followers: “You are salt to the world!” and, “You are light for the world.” Salt, perhaps. But light? For the world? Seems a tall order.

To find a way to grasp something of what this Jesus is about here, I'd like to turn our thoughts to one of the great novels of our time by one of the most distinguished writers of our nation's storied literary past: the novel, *Beloved*, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988, and the author, Toni Morrison—who died in August of last year—went on to receive the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. The story, made into a blockbuster movie starring Oprah Winfrey, Danny Glover, and Thandie Newton, is grim, to be sure. Based on a true story about a slave woman named “Sethe”—played in the movie by Oprah Winfrey—it depicts the violence she endured on a Kentucky plantation in the days before the Civil War, and her attempt to flee just before the Emancipation Proclamation. The story is a difficult account of the brutality of the slave system, a horror largely ignored by Christians of the times. Isaiah, at least, would not have looked away from all this.

Morrison's novel recounts the long and bitter path of refugees from slavery in their quest for freedom, a hard journey taking them through unimaginable suffering. The shape of the story occurs during Reconstruction in a black settlement on the outskirts of Cincinnati. Sethe, a runaway slave who found her way to southern Ohio, is a woman with “iron eyes and backbone to match.” Hers is a story is one of bravery, grit, and unimaginable tragedy. But throughout it all she remains clear about one truth: the horror of her past is “still there, waiting,” Morrison writes, because, as she says, “nothing ever dies.” (36) It is etched on her back in a terrible scar in the shape of a tree, the consequence of a severe whipping at the hands of the slave overseer and his sons on the Kentucky farm known – with poignant irony – as “Sweet Home.” It was the emblem of “her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches.” (17) In Sethe's struggle to recover a dignity denied her by her

oppressors, Morrison explores the dynamics of violence and fear in the lives of these victims of slavery. It is an account of the way racism cripples its victims, luring them to internalize the hatred they bear at the hands of others.

As the novel opens, we meet Paul D, a friend of her former husband's from "Sweet Home." He'd escaped finally from brutal servitude on a "chain gang," his sentence for murdering one of the white farm hands. Somehow, he'd located Sethe's whereabouts some eighteen years later, and had made the long journey by foot to find her. When they meet, each of them carries on their bodies the ugly scars of brutal mistreatment. Each also suffers from the interior wounds of self-contempt. Sethe's vocation, as she comes to understand it, is to "beat back the past" which remains alive within her. In her new-found surroundings, she had become part of a community of former slaves under the spiritual guidance of her mother-in-law, "Baby Suggs, holy," an "unchurched preacher. . .who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it." (87)

In "winter and fall," Morrison tells us, "Baby Suggs, holy," an "unchurched preacher. . .who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it," went from one black church to the next: "uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence." But in the summer, she gathered the community around her outdoors, in a place called "the Clearing," and they all came – children, men, and women. She commands the children first to come into the opening, and laugh; the grown men, to dance; and the women, finally, to cry:

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. (87 – 88)

She goes on to show them what it would mean to love themselves, to love their flesh, their bodies wounded and scarred from the torture of slavery:

"This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck

unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.” Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh. (88 – 89)

This is not the sort of prophecy Isaiah delivered in his railing against a nation that kept the posture of obedience while ignoring the substance of justice. It is closer to Jesus' words of unbridled affirmation: “You are salt to the world. You are light for all the world.” No qualifications about what they—what you—did or failed to do. No worry about our failings to keep a proper fast. No, Jesus' prophecy, if such it is, is all about encouragement of those beaten down by the system. His message: Love your life, with all its confusions and difficulties. And note well: he insists not that we should become illumined, that we need enlightening. No, he declares in direct terms: You are light for all the world. You. Light. For the world.

But here's the rub. We have to believe this, in the depths of our soul, for it to take shape in our lives. How are we to do this? Here, the wisdom of Baby Suggs, holy, tells it straight. In this old woman's preaching to a beaten down gathering of followers, she is clear that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.” And that they should, above all else, love their heart, “for this is the prize.”

Heart-work. Yes, that's the beginning of how we learn to live into grace, to live into love. It is what Jesus said over and over, that our work as humans is to live into justice, to uphold the dignity of all. Jesus knew—as my grandmother knew—that the best strategy to encourage growth was affirmation, not denunciation. His “state of the union” would have turned from strategies of division and diminishment. He'd not have had time for building walls to separate us from those in need. No, like the old preacher-woman Baby Suggs, holy, he'd have been about the work of opening his heart to the suffering that left some at the margins. He had no interest in boasting about his successes or maneuvering for his own privilege. Rather, he kept his eyes on the prize, which was seeing what the needs of others required of him and giving himself to serve them—all the way to death on a cross.

And he was quick to join Isaiah's call, that when we live in accord with justice, when we open ourselves to the pain others bear and take up their degradation as our own.

. . .then your light will break forth like the dawn,
 and new skin will speedily grow over your wound;
 your righteousness will go before you, and the
 glory of the Lord will come behind you.

Then, when you call, the Lord will answer you. . . (Isa. 58. 8)

What are we to do, then? And how are we to live with the painful burden of our nation's history, marred by the long memory of injustice and the ongoing burden of racial inequality? Here, Jesus' prophetic mandate is clear—and enough for us: “You are salt to the world....You are light for all the world. Like the lamp, you must shed light among others, so that, when they see the good you do, they may give praise to your God in heaven.”

We let this light shine when we trust in our own beauty, and open ourselves to finding it in others. We shine when we commit ourselves to do the hard work of imagining a wider mercy, a truer vulnerability to the suffering of others, a more just commitment of solidarity to those most in need. With Isaiah, we find ourselves invited to do the work of restoration: “Buildings long in ruins will be restored by your own kindred and you will build on ancient foundations; you will be called. . .the restorer of houses in ruins.” Such words ring hard against the violent political climate in which we now live. In such times, with our “house” shattered by dissent, we would do well to listen again to the wisdom of that old black preacher-woman, Baby Suggs, holy, who prophesied that “the only grace [we] could have was the grace [we] could imagine. That if [we] could not see it, [we] would not have it.” For you are salt to the world, a light for all the world. May we find the courage to do the heartwork required to “let our light shine among others,” and so be those called “restorers of houses in ruin.”