

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany—Year A
Isaiah 58:1-9a, [9b-12]
Psalm 112:1-9, [10]
I Corinthians 2:1-12, [13-16]
Matthew 5:13-20

This sermon feels a little disjointed and a little all-over-the-map, but somehow, this seems fitting given the week, and what a bizarre, **weird week** it has been.

There is our **national life** on display for all to see. The long-awaited **Iowa Caucuses** that were going to clarify the race on the Democratic side that ended in *confusion* and a *complete muddle*. **The State of the Union** where our *national leaders cannot muster mere civility toward one another*, and, where it is clear, that the *division we saw on TV* mirrors the *division in our country* with *one half of the country* believing the *state of our union is strong* and *one half* thinking *our union is deeply imperiled*. And that just got us to **Tuesday**.

Wednesday, the **President was acquitted in the impeachment trial**. Maybe there was a *hope* that this chapter would be closed, and our country could move on, but that is not to be. **Democrats promise continued investigations**.

On **Thursday**, another norm in our civic life fell away. The **National Prayer Breakfast** has traditionally been a time to come together across differences. A keynote address by **Arthur Brooks**, a Harvard professor and former president of American Enterprise Institute, a conservative thinktank, **decried a “crisis of contempt and polarization” and urged his listeners to “love your enemies.”**

That command to **“love your enemies”** comes straight from **Jesus** in **Matthew 5**, which is **right in the middle of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount**, which is the *same* chapter **5** from which today’s gospel comes, which is the *same* chapter **5** that will remind us that **retaliation is not the way of those who follow Jesus**.

The **President** followed **Arthur Brooks** and opened his remarks by saying, **“Arthur, I don’t know if I agree with you...I don’t know if Arthur is going to like what I’m going to say.”** The **President** then went on to **lash out at his enemies**, a theme that he **continued in remarks later that day**. At the **National Prayer Breakfast**, the **President did concede** that **“it’s not easy,”** and he is *absolutely right*, **“loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you”** is as hard as it gets, **but this is what Jesus asks of us**.

With all of this going on in *our nation*, how do we hear **Isaiah** this morning? **Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion**, and here, **Isaiah** is addressing the **people of Judah**; he’s addressing them as *a nation*. **Isaiah** then goes on to point out **their rebellion**, and what is the **nature of that rebellion**? In a nutshell, **their practicing of righteousness in a performative way**, tending to the **externals—fasting, bowing down your head, lying in sackcloth and ashes**, looking oh so **humble**—but actually **making a mockery of it all** by **“serving your own interest on your fast day, oppressing all your workers, and fasting only to quarrel and fight.”**

Isaiah then goes on to line out **the fast that God chooses: loosing the bonds of injustice, undoing the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free, breaking every yoke, sharing your bread with the**

hungry, bringing the homeless poor into your own house, covering the naked, not hiding from your kin.

Isaiah then takes it *even further*—this is what **removing the yoke from among you** looks like—and **this is hard**—*instead* of pointing the finger at others and speaking evil, *we* are to **offer our bread to the hungry** (*second time* he mentions that) and **satisfy the needs of the afflicted**. For Isaiah, this is how we become **repairers of the breach**.

And remember, a **breach is a gap in a wall or a defense made by battering**. I'd say our **civic life** is experiencing a pretty big **breach**, and *no matter where you stand on all the issues dividing us*, I think we can *all* agree that we're *all* **feeling battered**.

I wonder, how would Isaiah describe *our rebellion as a nation*? Even if we can't agree on the **how this divisive, corrosive disease** has **taken its hold** and **spread so pervasively** among us, *what if we just set about the work of repairing the breach by taking on the fast God has chosen and stopped pointing the finger and speaking evil of our enemies*? What if we **ceased our quarrels and fights**, and tried, *instead*, to **satisfy the needs of the afflicted—the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the naked**—all that **Matthew 25** stuff that Jesus tells us to do for **the least of these**? What if we all **fasted from the vitriol and took on this Isaiah 58 fast instead**? Might this be the “**righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees**” that Jesus says we need to *cultivate* if we are to **enter the kingdom of heaven**. Jesus knows that **you just can't experience that sweet communion we call heaven if we are quarreling and fighting and leaving swaths of God's beloved children behind**.

And all of this **national mess** is just the **backdrop to our lives**. I am deeply aware that so many **individuals and families** in our **St. Luke's community** are going through **hard, hard things right now**.

Many are **confronting the limitations and struggles** that **come with aging**, either in **their own bodies and lives**, or **in the life of a parent or close friend**. The **choices** people have to **wrestle with** in this stage of life are **so difficult**; you're **never sure if you're doing the right thing**, and the **grief** that comes with these changes is **real and weighs heavy in the heart**.

Some in our faith community are **wrestling with how to best love a family member or friend** who **struggles with addiction or mental illness**.

Others in our midst are **carrying burdens we don't even know about, unspoken pains hidden in their own hearts**.

For so many among us, it's just hard right now.

With all of this swirling, in my head and heart, I took off for a **clergy retreat day this past Friday in Black Mountain on Creation Care**. We had a whole team of people attend the lay portion of the retreat yesterday. I'll be honest, as the keynote speaker started to speak on the **theme of hope and despair** and **launched into Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the theological virtue of hope and its four constituent characteristics**, I was deeply aware that **I didn't not have the bandwidth for a theological treatise on hope just now**. *Ever have that feeling where it's all just words bouncing off you like Teflon?*

About that time, I got the text that our **beloved Virginia MacLeod** was in the process of **crossing over the threshold, moving from life through death and into life anew**. I left the **theological treatise on hope** and **drove back to Boone**. *She died before I even got out of Black Mountain.*

When I arrived at the hospital, and walked into that room—there sat **Jacque and Greg and Baxter** keeping vigil as the family stepped out to get something to eat—**Virginia** lay there, her breath gone, but her **BEING** filled with perfect peace, and her light shining bright, and that peace and light filled the whole room. Her family returned, we did the prayers and commended her to God; stories were shared and toasts were lifted to her beautiful life in a manner that, no doubt, would have pleased **Virginia**. *And I didn't need a treatise on hope, it was all there right before our eyes, in all of our hearts, felt and tangible.* Virginia's life still radiant, shining for all of us to see—that's what a righteous life **DOES**; it just keeps on shining, *even if the breath goes out of the mortal body.*

Amidst all the chaos in our country, amidst all the turmoil in our lives, there are amazing, courageous, and beautiful lives whose light shines out brightly, whose ripples extend out in directions and reach places we'll never know. There are journeys made, quietly, of tremendous courage, to live well, and to die well, and beautiful companions who accompany these journeys through the most holy and liminal spaces.

Hope isn't just an archaic theological concept with four constituent characteristics; it's a **LIVED EXPERIENCE** that *knows* that our life AND our death are held in much bigger place—as the Burial Office proclaims: “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's possession”; hope is the **LIVED EXPERIENCE** that *knows* that the light that shines within us can't be snuffed out, *not even when our mortal body breathes its last*; it's the **LIVED EXPERIENCE** that *knows* that amidst all the changes and chances and chaos of this life, God's presence holds firm, stands still, anchors us, breathes through us, illuminates us, guides us.

Hope is the **LIVED EXPERIENCE** of the peace that passes all understanding in the midst of suffering, in the midst of loss, in the midst of joy, in the midst of laughter, in the midst of sorrow, in the midst of confusion, in the midst of clarity, in the midst of life, and in the hour of our death. Hope *keeps whispering*, “I am here, and I with you always, even to the end of the ages.”

At the end of this weird week, in a quiet hospital room, when death took hold, darkness *did not*. Hope and peace **REIGNED**, full of light and life. If hope and peace *can reign there*, hope and peace *can reign anywhere*; hope and peace *can reign everywhere*— amidst our national mess, amidst the brokenness in our lives. Hope and peace will find you; and *Virginia will make sure of it.* Amen.

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