

“Pointing Fingers” A sermon based on Isaiah 58:1-12, 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 and Matthew 5:13-20 delivered on February 8, 2023 at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young.

Take a good look at the picture in your bulletins this morning. Hold it out at arm’s length and look right at it unblinkingly. How does that pointed index finger make you feel? Are you squirming in your pew? Does it feel like you are being shamed and/or blamed for something? Do you feel like swatting it away and pointing your own index figure in a completely different direction altogether?! Or perhaps, if you remember the posters from the wars of the last century where such a finger is attached to a guy wearing a red, white and blue top hat and saying “Your Country Needs YOU!” you might be feeling some patriotic pride that you had been singled out by Uncle Sam.

In our Isaiah passage this morning pointing fingers takes center stage. The prophet, speaking for God, points his finger at the chosen people and chides them for the way they are fasting; “only to quarrel and fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” (58:4) The prophet, speaking what God has told him, reminds the people that this is not the fast that the Holy One seeks. This fast of “the pointing the finger, the speaking of evil” is the opposite of the worship that God seeks of them. The fast God seeks involves “action” not shame and blame. It involves that Israel “share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your

house, when you see the naked cover them, and not to hide yourself with your own kin..." (58:7) Then and **only then**, God has Isaiah assure them "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn." (58:8a)

In his first letter to the church he founded in Corinth, Paul urges them not to rest their faith on human wisdom, but on the power of God." (2:5) And the way they are to do this is to remember the answer to the question, "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" The answer is "we have the mind of Christ." (2:16) So . . .how then do we, these thousands of years later, know the "mind of Christ"?

We know it, as fully as we can know it as flawed human beings, by taking our cues from the witness of the Gospel. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus does some finger pointing of his own. This kind of finger pointing is not the "shame and blame" kind but the kind that points to us, like the old posters of Uncle Sam, and says it is "You, yes You" I Need You to be the "salt of the earth, the light of the world" we are to "put our light on the lampstand and give light to the whole house." WE are to let our light shine before others, so that they may see our [your] good works and give glory to our [your] Father in heaven." (5:19) And then Jesus reminds the disciples, and us in turn, that he has come "not to abolish the law or the prophets; ...but to fulfill" it. (5:17) In the red-letter study Bible of our childhood, every one of these words

that we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew would be emblazoned in bright red!

So, how should we react to this kind of “finger pointing?” How do we fulfill our call as Christians in answer to being pointed out by Jesus as being “the salt of the earth” and the “light of the world”? There is a much quoted saying, often attributed to Native American wisdom, that goes like this, “Be careful when you point your finger at someone, for at the same time there are three of your fingers pointing back at you.” This saying is meant to remind all people that we must take responsibility for making things better in this world—not to point our fingers at others to take on that responsibility, so we can shirk our own duties.

We are the Creator’s only way to have “hands and feet” in this world. One of the most important messages of the Incarnation is that God had to become human in order to show us what those hands and feet should be doing. So, the example, the words, the parables of Jesus are the way we are to “learn the mind” of God and be pointed in the right direction of acting out our faith.

There is a classic Jewish story that goes like this:

In a small village in Poland there lived a wise rabbi. His followers loved him and came often to tell him of their woes. After a while the rabbi grew tired of hearing each one claim that their lot in life was so much more difficult to bear than their neighbor's. They were constantly asking, "Why doesn't he have to suffer as I do? Why doesn't she have a nagging husband, or why doesn't he have a lazy wife? Why doesn't she have back trouble, and why don't his children still live at home contributing nothing to the family's income?" On and on it went until the rabbi came up with a plan.

He sent out word that there was to be a new holiday celebrated. "Bring your sorrows and troubles," he announced. "Bring them in a bag with your name on it and hang the bag from the great tree in the center of the village. All will be allowed to exchange troubles and to go home with those of your neighbor rather than your own."

The villagers were excited, imagining how much easier their lives would be from that day on. When the day came, they assembled beneath the tree with bags in hand. With bits of rope they tied their bags to the low branches of the tree so that all might inspect them. "Now," said the rabbi in a very official voice, "if you will all move about inspecting the bags, you may choose someone else's troubles to take home, thus freeing yourselves from your own."

The villagers rushed at the tree and began grabbing at and peering into bags, one after the other, around and around, around and around the tree . . .

Finally, quite tired out and feeling both foolish and wiser, they each sought out their own bags and walked home. The rabbi smiled. It was just as he had hoped. The villagers had

seen the sorrows of others as they really were, and had decided to stick with their own lots in life because, at least, they were familiar.

Former President Barack Obama once spoke eloquently to this point. He said,

Rather than pointing fingers or assigning blame, let's use this occasion to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy and remind ourselves of all the ways that our hopes and dreams are bound together.

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