

The Grace

of becoming a good person

5th After Epiphany, February 9, 2020

The Parish of St. John in the Wilderness

*(Holy One, May we show your love in our lives,
because we know its fulfilment in your presence. Amen)*

I

In a world that is bland..... without any flavour..... **you** — *are the seasoning...*
For you have **tasted** that the Lord is Good, within your hearts & minds....
But if you **stop tasting** that goodness, *you become bland again.....*

In a world that is dim... where only shadows can be seen..... **you** — *are the light...*
For you have **seen** the Radiant glory of God, within your hearts & minds....
But if you **stop seeing** that Radiance, *you become dim again.....*

It's a call to *regular, frequent immersion* in the goodness & radiance of God, to the point that others can actually "taste" and "see" it, in the details of our lives (*in how we think & feel; in the choices we make; in the words we say and the actions we take.*)

It's **not** a call to put yourself in a moral straight-jacket, where you become preoccupied with always trying to say & do the exactly right thing. It's not so much a call to "*try to do your best,*" as it is call to "**not try**" to *do-it-yourself.*

It's **not** a call to "say prayers" in the formal sense, but to live "a prayerful life" in the informal, everyday sense. A life of — inwardly, mindfully, frequently — immersing ourselves in the unfathomable Goodness & Radiance of God — the limitless Love & Wisdom of God — from moment to moment. We could say it's kind of like an informal "**Baptism.**" A Baptism we don't engage in physically & publicly — but spiritually & privately — within our hearts & minds. A Baptism where the Radiant Goodness of God is the "water" — the *Living* water — that cleanses, heals & refreshes us, and "*wakes us up*" spiritually.

We're formally, outwardly baptized in water *only once in our lives.* But we can "sign up" for this informal, invisible baptism *many times a day.* Simply by inwardly pausing... and letting the Holy Spirit use our God-given imaginations... to immerse us in divine love & wisdom, immerse us in "the peace that passeth all understanding." **And no one has to know...** because it's happening secretly, within our hearts & minds. We can engage in it when we're shopping in the supermarket; when we're at work; when we're waiting in the doctor's office; when we're talking with a friend (or an enemy); when we're taking a shower or a bath; washing the dishes; doing the laundry; or when we're simply "just sitting," with nothing to do. We can practice it when we wake up in the morning, or before we fall asleep at night, or any time, anywhere, as often as we want.

And when we *do*... silently, inwardly, let ourselves be immersed in God's Goodness, it reorients our hearts & minds. It cleans our consciences, and makes them less harsh, more merciful. It gives our lives a new "*flavour*," a new "*shine*" or "*glow*." And when those we interact with "*taste*" that flavour and "*see*" that glow, they can tell we're not just "well caffeinated," or on a "sugar high," or some kind of "fanatic." They know (at some level) that this "taste" & "glow" is *divine*. Because somehow, within their own hearts & minds, it "seasons" & "brightens" the areas in their lives that are "bland" & "dim" – with faith, hope, & love. And things no longer look the same.

For Jesus, this is what it means to become "**a good person.**" This is how we become "salty" and "shiny" in a world that — by and large — is "bland" & "dim." Immersion in the Goodness of God — and immersion in the "Good Company" of "salty" & "shiny" friends — is how real human goodness is *born*.... and how it (slowly) *develops*... and how it (slowly) *spreads* — even to others who are, *not yet*, "good company." This is what Jesus means when he says, "I have come to **fulfill** the Law." The Law is fulfilled, when the **actual** Goodness of God — which the words of the Law could only **point** to — are written within our hearts & minds.

II

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to becoming good (in this deeper, spiritual sense) is that there are so many "quick" ways to "**fake it.**" So very many ways of outwardly **appearing** to be full of light & flavour — when we are actually quite dim & bland on the inside. So it's no coincidence that Jesus ends his teaching on our being "*the salt of the earth*" & "*the light of the world*" with a comment that **this means transcending** "*the 'goodness' of certain Scribes & Pharisees.*" For they were "the experts" at the quick, "*religious*" way of "faking it."

As Jesus often does — to emphasize & clarify his point — he chooses an **extreme** example, like *the most corrupt* of the Scribes & Pharisees. So when we hear about these guys, we have to be careful to not automatically assume that this *extreme case* is about **us** — so we don't take it too personally. *And, likewise*, we have to be careful to not automatically assume that it applies to that person "just a few pews away," whom we find irritating. (So far, at least, I haven't encountered any corrupt extremists here — just **ordinary** people — more-or-less like me & you.)

Jesus had taught his disciples about the apparent goodness of these Scribes & Pharisees many times before. He'd compared it, for example, to a "*white-washed tomb*" (which is **outwardly** bright, shiny, and attractive — but **inwardly** full of decay & death.) Being with these leaders was a **strange** experience, because even when their words seemed holy and "*sweet*," they somehow left you with a "*bitter*" taste in your mouth. You could **feel** the incongruity, even if you couldn't quite **understand** where it was coming from or what it was all about. But after being with them for a while, you started to feel incongruent yourself. It was **confusing**. So... you went back for more of their "good counsel." (It's kind of like the McDonald's principle: "As long as we can make it **taste** really good — they'll assume it **is** really — and when they get indigestion, they'll just take a pill, and come back tomorrow for more." And before we know it, we start believing that truly "bitter" things are truly "sweet," and that "*Nobody can do it... like McDonalds can.*")

Something like this was happening religiously through these Scribes & Pharisees. And it was quite a predicament for the people, because (unlike Jesus) these leaders held high offices. They had official authority in the religious institution. So, should you trust **them**, or trust your **gut**?

Sometimes it's that black & white, but not always. It took the disciples a long time to grasp Jesus' teaching that "*sweet fruit doesn't grow on bitter trees*" & "*bitter fruit doesn't grow on sweet trees.*" But, eventually, they grew to understand **the dynamics of "faking it"** — ("how it works") — both in the *extreme* case of these Scribes & Pharisees — and within their own, less complicated lives. They learned how to discern the quality & dynamics of what was going on inside of them... through the quality of how they actually related to others. They learned how to be transformed not just *outwardly*, but *inwardly*. In other words, they grew to understand the dynamics of divine Grace — "how Grace works" in everyday life. Jesus taught them well. And, thankfully, they passed it on to us.

The *religious way* of "faking it" is not some new problem that suddenly arose in the time of Jesus. It's the very same condition that God describes through the prophet Isaiah in this morning's first reading. And, again, to emphasize and clarify his point, he focuses on an extreme case. He describes it like this:

Inwardly, their hearts are hardened & rebellious — but ***outwardly***, day after day, they ***seek*** me and ***delight*** to know my ways... they ***delight*** to draw near me and ask for my favour... they fast, bowing down their heads, and lying in sackcloth & ashes..... ***as if***..... they actually ***practiced*** righteousness.....

But in their everyday lives, they are completely self-serving: they oppress all their workers... they quarrel & fight & strike with a wicked fist. When they see the hungry, they don't share their bread with them. When they see the homeless poor, they don't bring them into their houses. When they see the naked, they don't give them clothes to wear.

When they "worship" me, their "worship" is merely a following of man-made rules that they have learned by rote. They come near to me ***with their mouths***, and love me ***with their lips***, but their ***hearts*** are far from me.

Only when this problem is resolved, God says through Isaiah, "*will their light break forth like the dawn, and their healing spring up quickly...*"

But "faking it" goes back much, much farther than that. "Faking it" is actually the oldest problem in the human world. We could even say that "*faking it*" — *trying to become "like" God, "without" God* — is the original sin.

III

So... it's not surprising that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we ***all*** sometimes catch ourselves "being good" in ways that are just a "cover up" of what's actually going on inside of us. It's a human predicament that (like it or not) we all share. It's also true, though, that we sometimes ***do*** have to "*fake it till we make it,*" to prevent harming ourselves & others. We've all been there. And it's clearly not the best long term strategy.

Still, the fact that we *all* sometimes "fake it," is not the end of the world. Welcome to the human race! But we can **grow beyond** faking it – maybe not **completely** in this life, but **significantly** – enough to make a real difference in our lives & the lives of others. We can still be "*the salt of the earth*" & "*the light of the world*" —**just not** all by ourselves —**just not** through the power of our own wills & skills —**just not** without God.

In other words, we're like Jesus. As he said, "*I can, of mine own self, do nothing*" (John 5:30.) Unless I'm being **inwardly** immersed in the Goodness of God, I can **outwardly** do no good. (*And Jesus wasn't suffering from low self-esteem when he said this!*) He just knew the truth about himself — a truth he learned by immersion. He knew how absolutely dependent on God he was for his goodness. That's why his "burden" is "light." And we are no different, no less dependent. We're just more easily persuaded that we can do **plenty** of good all by ourselves... *if only we try hard enough*. We're really *enchanted* with *D.I.Y.* !!!

But it's actually when we're feeling that we're just "not good enough" — when we're feeling that we just have to keep trying *harder & harder until we're white in the knuckles*... to be a good person... to be more like Jesus... etc., etc.... — *that we most need to just.... take a bath...*

And not just *outwardly*... not just a "*Take me away Calgon!*" moment... (*although those are also helpful...*) But *inwardly*, spiritually, within our hearts & minds. Laying down the striving, and the heavy burden, of trying to "do life" by ourselves. And, following the example of Jesus, letting ourselves be immersed — in that private, invisible Baptism — into the redeeming, healing, rejuvenating Goodness of God. Then, our wills & skills... become "graced." They're no longer just "ours alone." They have a different "flavour" & "lightness" & "strength" — that can change our lives — and the lives of those affected by our words & actions (*even though we're still just ordinary human beings.*)

And remember: we have to keep at it — not just take the occasional 'dip' now & then — or we'll soon get "bland" & "dim" again.

Let us pray. *Holy One, May we show your love in our lives,
because we know its fulfilment in your presence. Amen.*