

Sermon for Epiphany 5A
Sunday, February 5, 2023
“Salt and Light”

Text: Matthew 5:13-20

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“You are the salt of the earth.” Salt is one of the most abundant and important compounds on earth. The simple, natural combination of sodium and chloride is vital to the function of most cells in our bodies. Salt is important in giving foods more flavor. Salt can be used as a preservative and as a cleanser. Chemical salts make batteries work. In Roman times, soldiers were given an allowance to buy salt (*salarium*), from which we get the word ‘salary.’ Salt is an important substance in preventing us from slipping on our streets and sidewalks when the ground is icy. Although inexpensive because of its abundance, salt is priceless in its value. Light is equally as important. Some light we experience is abundant and free; sunlight, for example, comes every day, even on a cloudy day, and all of the earth benefits from its light, heat, energy, and radiation. Life itself would not exist without the light from the sun. Some light we know must be harnessed by human means to offer us benefit; take the lights in this building: they help us see while indoors, but we have to pay ConEdison to get it. Jesus knew the importance of salt and light when he used them as examples in today’s Gospel. Salt and light are images that would have been understood by anyone hearing Jesus and transcend culture, class, and time.

Today’s Gospel lesson is the continuation of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, which includes the Beatitudes that we heard last week. You remember: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” and so on. The nine points of the Beatitudes are meant to encourage and give hope to his followers. Most of them weren’t rich. Most of them had little political power. Most of them lived on the margins of society. Some of them may have even faced the worst injustices and could do nothing about it. By the time Matthew’s Gospel was written down—around forty years after the Sermon on the Mount—the Temple had been destroyed and Jerusalem lay in ruins. The Beatitudes were a message to them—and us—to keep going even in the toughest of times and most dismal of situations. Never to give up hope that things can get better, but even if they don’t get better while we are alive in this world, we can be assured that things will be perfect in the world to come when we dwell in the kingdom of the all-powerful, totally loving, and perfectly just God. A place where all of the injustices of this world will be no more. But, in the meanwhile, while we are still living in the present age in this world, we need to live with as much integrity and pride as we can, we need to show love and forgiveness, even to the people who treat us unfairly, we need to be like salt in a pot and light in a lamp.

Jesus and the people of his time faced other challenges a little closer to their hearts and souls. Many of the people who were supposed to be their leaders and mentors, particularly the Pharisees and the scribes, went around dressing up in their Sabbath best, wearing prayer boxes, called phylacteries, on their heads, showing off how

devout and pious they were, but it was for show. They cared about the outside appearance, not what was on the inside. They cared more about going through the motions and showing off how well they knew the Law, but they weren't interested in helping out those in need. Jesus was pointing out that what's outside is not important; it's what's inside. The people who were supposed to be the most devout and learned were living an empty faith. It was as though they were salt that had lost its saltiness. He recognized the need to wake people up and get them to start living out their faith, to be like a light shining in the darkness, or like the salt that makes food taste good. Jesus himself said that he didn't come to abolish the old law, but to fulfill it and to show others how to live it out. He wasn't trying to start a new religion, he was trying to improve on the old one.

The message that Jesus taught is just as relevant for us today as it was back then. We also struggle with our own Christian identity. Secularism is on the rise. More and more people are being drawn to non-religious activities and fewer people are coming through church doors. People nowadays prefer to call themselves "spiritual" but they don't want to be "religious." Some people want to keep believing, but they don't want to put in the time and energy to nurture their relationship with a worshipping community. Perhaps, the excitement of our living faith is not there. Church just doesn't feel exciting anymore. Folks don't feel like they get much out of it, so why should they go? Others have stopped believing in God altogether. Many folks today feel that religion is an unnecessary relic of humankind's superstitious past. And we are facing tougher and tougher times. We encounter injustices of all types, not just social injustices, but economic injustice. The cost of living is getting more and more expensive. It's getting more difficult for people to afford even the basic things in life. I'm sure we're all well aware of how much more expensive eggs and milk are now. But even in the midst of all of our struggles and challenges, we have to keep going. Today's gospel is for us. It is a lesson in Christian discipleship. It is a wakeup call for us to recapture our saltiness so that we are bearers of the light of Christ to the world.

I know we like food around here, and those of us who cook know that if you put salt in a pot, you don't even need to stir it, the salt will flavor the whole pot. Today's message to us is for us to be like that salt in a pot, letting the way we live and our very essence express the light of Christ and the love of God and the hope that God is still in our midst, moving and working in the world, even when we can't see it. Like salt in a pot flavors any food, this gospel challenges us to flavor our world by our very being—to make a difference in some way so that others can see. That doesn't mean we have to go do something that's going to make the evening news—that's not what the gospel is telling us. The gospel is telling us to do something however small or great that will represent the kingdom of God in our midst. Today's first bible reading from Isaiah gives some examples of what that might look like: share bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house, cover the naked, "then your light shall break forth like the dawn." Those are examples, but those are not the only way that we can be like

salt or light. A simple smile at the person you meet walking on the sidewalk as you leave today is also a way of letting your light shine—the light of Christ within you.

Sometimes we act as though being a good Christian is all about giving and doing, but receiving is just as important as giving. As much as we give to others, allowing others to give to us means that we recognize the light of Christ shining within them, we recognize their ability to flavor our world. It shows that we value them and respect their dignity—one of our baptismal vows. Let someone know how much they mean to you—your spouse, your child, your co-worker, your enemy. Oh yes! That’s where this gospel gets challenging. It’s easy to do all these things for the people we like. It’s easy to be a “good Christian” when times are good. Let your light shine among those you don’t like, because you don’t know what’s going on in their lives, what struggles they may be going through. Don’t grumble as you write that check to the IRS for taxes you owe, but think about how those tax dollars will help pay for food stamps for someone struggling to feed his/her family; or, help fund Medicare and Medicaid for those who struggle with healthcare; or, Section 8 housing for families needing shelter. And, pray for those persons who don’t seem to be allowing their light to shine, so that they might recognize the Christ in themselves. Let your own light shine, even if times are tough for you. Finally, just as salt protects food from spoiling—hence, being corrupted—we can be like salt against the corruption of our society and speak out against injustice, oppression, violence, racism, economic and gender inequality, discrimination, and the other vices of our society. There is still good news to proclaim; God is always blessing us and he is always in control. God is good—all the time and we need to live in a way that shows we truly believe that.

If we take today’s gospel seriously, as we should, then it challenges us to be different. It calls us to be the kind of person who can meet people where they are and respond to the things happening in their lives, not in a way that judges and points fingers at what they’re doing wrong, but one that recognizes the light of Christ within ourselves and in all people. We can be the salt that brings good flavor to a world hungering to hear some good news in the midst of the world’s strife and controversies, in the midst of sickness and disaster. We can let our light shine so that others see our good works and glorify God in heaven. We can be bearers of both salt and light. Amen.