

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 5, 2017
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Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 112:1-9
1 Corinthians 2:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20

There's an old story told about a teacher who decided one day to make chocolate chip cookies with the class of six-year-olds. It was a lesson designed to teach them about the importance of following directions and about the importance of sharing in something delicious.

They carefully measured out the flour. They creamed the butter and mixed in the chocolate chips and nuts. The kids wanted to eat the batter and lick the spoons, but the teacher made them promise to wait. The plan was to have them all eat their first cookie together, all at the same time, so they could share in the delight of it all.

And so the excitement grew. They could smell the cookies baking. They saw them come back out of the oven and placed on the cooling racks. Big, ginormous cookies. Golden brown and beautiful cookies.

Finally, the cookies had cooled long enough and were ready. Each child held her or his cookie and then, on the count of three, they each took a huge bite of their amazing cookies ...

And then they all spat their cookies out again! They were terrible, the worst-tasting cookies anyone had ever eaten. They threw them all out in the end. The teacher was mystified about what went wrong. The recipe was tried and true. But after looking once more down the list of ingredients, suddenly the reason became clear: they had forgotten the salt. And without the salt, the cookies were just a tasteless mess.

In recent decades, salt has gotten a bad reputation. No doubt too much salt carries health risks for many people. And yet, salt is still essential for bringing out the flavors in the food we eat.

In our gospel this morning, Jesus tells the disciples, "You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world." These words come right on the heels of what we heard Jesus say in our gospel last Sunday.

As I mentioned last week, Jesus called his disciples and then he sat them down to teach them: first, he taught them that God longs to bless all sorts of people; and then, he tells them that they are salt for the earth and light for the world.

The imagery loses a little something for us. Salt and light are ubiquitous realities in our world – too common. Too much salt in our processed foods is bad for our bodies and too much salt on our roads and highways kills plants, ruins soils, and harms microbes in streams and rivers. We flip a switch to turn on the lights. And because it's so cheap and easy, we light up everything, polluting the night skies in the process.

But in ancient times, wars have been fought over the control of salt supplies. Salt was rare, hard to get, and considered a precious commodity. I heard it said recently that in biblical times, light was costly – 15 minutes might cost as much as a days' wages. So when Jesus tells his disciples to think of themselves as salt and as light, it's high praise indeed.

The Roman Catholic priest and writer John Shea says:

It is meant to cut through lesser evaluations ('You are a sinner' or 'no good' or 'mediocre' or 'a loser') and establish this truth in the minds and hearts of those who are addressed.ⁱ

And it's all said in the present tense. Jesus doesn't say that they'll one day become salt and light. He says that's who they already are. The thing of it is, though ... they haven't done a darn thing yet to warrant the high praise. Which tells me that, so far as Jesus must be concerned, this is our God-given identity from the start – not a thing to be earned or proven. It's just a given. And God forbid anyone who would say otherwise.

Of course, there are those – the scribes and the Pharisees among them – who do say otherwise. And that's why, I think, Jesus is so dismissive of their brand of righteousness. Jesus seems to have regarded them as "nitpickers" who loved rules at the expense of loving people." Jesus says, as I hear him, that if their righteousness prefers rules over people or allows them to pick who's in and who's out, do better. His followers should exceed that kind of righteousness.

"You're the salt of the earth. You're the light of the world." It's high praise. And once it's offered, it not only tells them who they are, it tells them their purpose. Eugene Peterson's rendering of these verses puts it exquisitely:

"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives.

[Matthew 5:13-16a (*The Message*)]

You are the salt of the earth. It's a compliment. You are the light of the world. It's a high calling. But make no mistake, it's all also a word of warning.

Jesus goes on to speak of salt that loses its saltiness and of a light that gets put under a bushel basket. Apparently, the salt he knew wasn't pure Sodium Chloride and could somehow decompose over time.

But I don't think we need to understand the chemistry to get the point. Whether it goes bad or not, salt left on a shelf might as well be tossed out for all the good it does, because the only way it can do any good is by being spent. The only good salt is salt that brings out the "God-flavors" of life.

So, too, just as any light contained within a closed space is as worthless as no light at all – worth less than no light at all, I suppose, for the waste of energy used to create light that shines without any benefit to the outside. Light does no good unless it brings out the "God-colors" in others.

We're not here this morning to be saved, but to be spent; our task is not to store up something good for us, but to have our lives shared out.

"You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world." These words of affirmation are primary teachings for Jesus' first followers. We would do well to start there, as well. Jesus tells us who we are from the start, hoping we'll hear them and internalize them before we ever do anything to prove it. It is, as John Shea put it, "meant to cut through lesser evaluations."

And yet Jesus intends, I think it's fair to say, that we will do something with the affirmation, that we'll share ourselves with a world too often bland and lacking in spice, a world too often dreary and needing light.

To be salt of the earth, Michael Curry once said, is to "help bring out the flavor that God intended from the beginning." To be the light of the world is to "illuminate what God intended the world to look like in the beginning."ⁱⁱ Or, as he puts it elsewhere in his preaching, our job is to transform this world from the nightmare it has become into the dream God intends for it.

It's who we are. It's what we do. For the good of the world. And for our own good, as well. We need to be light and salt for our very souls. Isaiah said as much in that first reading this morning. The prophet insists that we cannot, except at our own peril, separate private worship from public life and action. As one commentator put it:

The scriptures are clear on the point that people who are anxious to raise holy hands but slow to extend a helping hand to their neighbors in need will not enjoy God's favor.ⁱⁱⁱ

In that first reading this morning, the people complain that God has ignored them. They fast. They're pray. They try to get God to notice them, to pay attention to them. And all the while, they fail to see the irony of how they're ignoring the people around them. God will bless them, Isaiah says, only if their fasts make a difference in their world for the oppressed and those who need us. Do not "hide yourself from you own kin," the prophet says,

Then your light shall break forth ...

... then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Or, returning the connection Jesus makes between who we are and what we do:

*You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth ...
You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world ... shine!*

ⁱ John Shea, in *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year C: On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2004), p. 73.

ⁱⁱ Michael Curry, "Episcopalians – Witnesses?" in *Songs My Grandma Sang* (Morehouse Publishing, New York, 2015), p. 43.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marvin McMickle, quoted @ <http://www.pulpitfiction.us/show-notes/204-epiphany-5a-feb-5-2017> -- accessed February 2, 2017.