

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 5, 2023

Isaiah 58:1-9a, [9b-12]

1 Corinthians 2:1-12, [13-16]

Matthew 5:13-20

Psalm 112:1-9, (10)

The Rev. Nat Johnson

Our gospel reading this morning picks up where we left off last week in what is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew's narrative, this sermon functions as Jesus' manifesto, his declaration of his mission and ministry. The reign of God that he has come to proclaim does not look like the economic, social, political, or religious status quo – and yet, throughout his sermon, Jesus insists that what he is and will be teaching them is not contrary to the instructions given through the Law and the Prophets. As he teaches the crowd, Jesus invites his hearers to reimagine what it means to be blessed, what it means to be holy. More than that, Jesus invites the crowd to *reimagine themselves*: “*YOU are the salt of the earth. YOU are the light of the world,*” he tells them.

It is interesting to me that Jesus doesn't tell his disciples that they *will be* the salt of the earth and the light of the world. There is an “alreadiness” (if I can coin a phrase) to their being salt and light. Jesus' statement here is declarative: here is the Word of God naming the beloved children of God the salt of the earth and the light of the world. For some of us, these analogies to salt and light seem overly familiar. For others of us, these analogies may seem strange, out of place in our common experience.

Salt was, and is, used for a variety of purposes: to enhance flavors, to preserve food, to heal. Salt is essential to human life. Light enables us to see. It is used symbolically to represent knowledge, clarity of perception, visibility. Biblical scholars differ in their opinions about what Jesus (or Matthew) intended by his use of salt and light to describe the children of God. I suspect that each proposal has merit and can be helpful in our understanding of who we are as disciples of Christ. Rather than get caught up in the detail of the analogy, it seems Matthew intends for the metaphors of salt and light to indicate the visible and tangible nature of being children of God.

You are the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World. As children of God, you are called to live your lives in such a way that you *flavor* the world around you. You are called to let your light shine as an embodiment of a reconciled relationship with God and with others. Just as someone does not light a lantern and then shove that lantern under a bucket or tuck it away in a closet, neither are you to hide your light from the world! In Jesus' declarative words we get a sense of purpose – salt is meant to season, flavor, and preserve; light is meant to shine – YOU are salt and light – You are meant to shine with God's brightness, to flavor the world around you with the spices of justice, peace, and love. YOU, dearly beloved, are not on your way to becoming salt or light – YOU ARE ALREADY salt and light. Jesus has spoken those words over you, declaring that your identity is wrapped up with this purpose!

We must proceed with a little caution here. Our identity of salt and light is not meant to mimic the binaries and hierarchies of the social, political, and economic order. These are not marks of superiority. Particularly in our society, these biblical descriptors have been coopted to support and perpetuate American exceptionalism. Though not the first president (nor the last) to use the phrase, Ronald Reagan spoke of the United States as a “shining city on a hill,” the light toward which the whole

world looked. This notion has permeated civil discourses, colored diplomatic relationships, and justified international economic exploitation. This is not what Jesus meant, nor is Matthew's inclusion of the Salt and Light narrative meant to stratify society along hierarchies of worth and status.

It is also significant that Jesus does not tell *individuals* that they are salt and light. The "you" in "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world," is plural. It is directed toward the community. It is the community, constituted by Jesus' call to follow him, who will be the salt and light of the world. Who we are as a community, the way we treat one another, the kind of hospitality that we practice with one another and for one another, the justice and peace toward which we work in the world – these are places where salt and light are manifest.

You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. This identity can feel heavy at times. In the face of the violence we bear witness to on a daily basis, the hate that fills our speech and partisan politics, the seemingly insurmountable barriers that divide us – in the face of these things, it can feel daunting to be salt and light. But, there is a promise in this declaration of identity. Regardless of the troubles we encounter, we can rest in the power of Jesus' metaphors – for salt, if it is true salt, can NEVER lose its saltiness; and no matter what bucket or closet we might seek to hide in, the light that we are can NEVER be extinguished.

I wonder, dear people of Grace, how you are flavoring this little corner of our world? Does our saltiness enhance the greater community in which we exist? Or does it overpower? Does our light reflect the Light of Christ, or is a self-made spotlight to shine on ourselves alone? Being salt and light should have profound consequences associated with it – what would happen if, tomorrow, Grace Episcopal Church ceased to exist? Would the Bainbridge Island community notice? Would the greater Kitsap County be impacted? Our saltiness and light are effective only insofar as we actively remember that we are called to follow in the way of Jesus, that we are called to live as witnesses to the justice and peace that God is establishing in the world through Christ. The values of the world are not compatible with the values of the kingdom of God. Our saltiness is tasted, our light is seen, whenever we disorder the status quo by valuing those who are dispossessed, caring for the sick and imprisoned, providing for the hungry and thirsty.

There's an old song, that perhaps you know. It's a song that has been adopted by groups of resisters, of grassroots movements that seek to shine their light on the injustices of this world – they know that the light that exists within them is something that no one is capable of taking away. I wonder, if you'll sing along with me if you know it...It goes something like this:

*This little light of ours, we're gonna let it shine.
This little light of ours, we're gonna let it shine.
This little light of ours, we're gonna let it shine.
let it shine, let it shine, let it shine...*

May God's light shine brightly within and through our common life!