

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, February 9, 2020
5th Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 5/Proper X/Year A
First Reading: Isaiah 58:1-9a[9b-12]
Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1-12[13-16]
Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:13-20
Sermon Title: “On Being Salt and Light”

Theme

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages his followers to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, doing good works and keeping God’s commandments.

Text

[Jesus said:] ¹³“**You are the salt of the earth**; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴“**You are the light of the world**. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Sermon

This weekend we *observe* the 5th Sunday of Epiphany, and we have one more week to go in this season. Then on February 23rd we will *observe* the Transfiguration of Our Lord, and the following Wednesday is Ash Wednesday already! But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. Let's *enjoy* this normally cold dark season of Epiphany.

Epiphany is kind of like a bridge season; see if you don't agree. We *celebrate* Advent, as a season of increasing light via our Advent Wreath, even though we are in the midst of darkening days and longer nights. I think we *celebrate* it because we know it leads to Christmas, and all the joy that that season brings. Christmas is always a short season, just one or two weekends long.

The actual festival day, the Epiphany of our Lord, gets our attention with the celebration of the visitation of the Magi, even though we don't really come out for it. But then we settle into the Season of Epiphany and it seems to me that it is nothing more than a bridge to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the season of Lent.

Yes, if we pay close attention, the days are getting a little longer each day. And though this year has lacked much snowfall and cold weather, we know that January and February are supposed to be the coldest and snowiest months of the year. And so we tend to cabin-down – be less active, stay indoors, just survive it.

And while that may be the way we live out our mortal days during the season of Epiphany, the readings for this 5th Sunday of Epiphany would indicate just the opposite.

In the First Reading, the Israelites have returned from Exile in Babylon and came back to the Promised Land to find it in ruins and that appears to have left them downtrodden. Now free to return to their homeland and worship as their faith required, their worship in actuality was empty and shallow; they were just going through the motions. And worse than that, the living of their lives of faith was self-centered, lacking in charity, and flat out disobedient to the Law of Moses.

So in that prophecy from Isaiah, the LORD God said and I paraphrase, "You call upon me for mercy for you and judgement against your enemies, but you have turned in on yourselves, taking advantage of the poor and needy for your own benefit. You need to do better than that."

But notice, God is always "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Psalm 86:15) At the end of the reading the LORD God told them that the worship the LORD desired was that they were:

- to loose the bonds of injustice,
- to undo the thongs of the yoke,
- to let the oppressed go free,
- to break every yoke,
- to share their bread with the hungry,
- to bring the homeless poor into their houses, and
- to cover the naked

*⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.*

*^{9a}Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

Zion, we are blessed to have Joan Gent as our Administrator of Worship & Music and Stephanie Chizmar as Choir Director and all the fine musical talent that we have in our Saturday Singers and Sunday Vocal Choir and Bell Choir. But listen to me carefully, our ministry of worship, as important as it is, is not more important than Food Distribution, or our discipleship ministries, or our Eucharistic Ministers, or the assistance we give to complete strangers, to name a few.

From this passage we can clearly see that while God does indeed send nourishing rain and warming sun on all creation, the blessing of the LORD is like an investment. It only makes sense that God will increase the blessing on those who are a blessing to others.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, if the First Reading wasn't a clear enough teaching about the living out of a life of faith, let us direct our attention to the Gospel Reading.

This Gospel Reading is just a small passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that, according to Matthew, comes from the beginning of his public ministry. Jesus had a gift for preaching and teaching using illustrations, metaphors, and parables, but in this teaching, he was particularly poetic, and it is a fact that this passage is a favorite of mine, not because I've nailed it, but because I see it as a standard that I aspire to. Notice that he said, in the present tense,

¹³"You are the salt of the earth."

¹⁴"You are the light of the world."

Now, of course, in the First Century science and knowledge was not nearly what it is today. Though they might not have been able to explain why, both salt and light are essential elements of earthly life.

Salt is the main source of sodium and chloride ions in the human diet. Sodium is essential for nerve and muscle function and is involved in the regulation of fluids in the body. Sodium also plays a role in the body's control of blood pressure and volume. Chloride ions serve as important electrolytes by regulating blood pH and pressure. Chloride is also a crucial component in the production of stomach acid which we require to digest food. And of course, salt brings out the flavor of food.

Jesus said that we, you and I, are the salt of the world. By that he meant that our participation in the world as his followers is essential to all other life. And while Christians as a whole often miss the mark, imagine if the Christian ethic of love and grace had not permeated the world as it has. I also think that Jesus meant that Christians, as his ambassadors sent into the world, bring out the flavor of the rest of the world – metaphorically speaking, of course.

Jesus also said we are the light of the world. Think about this, nothing is more important to us on Earth than the Sun. Without the Sun's heat and light, the Earth would be a nearly lifeless ball of ice-coated rock. The Sun warms our seas, stirs our atmosphere, generates our weather patterns, and gives energy to the growing green plants that provide the food and oxygen for life on Earth.

Have you ever thought about what would happen, how long we could survive if the sun just instantly went out? I have. It takes 8.2 minutes for the Sun's heat and light to reach earth, so for the first 8 minutes we wouldn't even know it. But after that there would be a rapid decline into near lifelessness. I could alarm you with what I have read recently while going down the rabbit hole of theoretical science on this subject on the internet, but I think my point has been made. There is really nothing more important to life than light.

Now then, when Jesus said we are the light of the world, he is really saying something, isn't he?

When we recently baptized little Samuel McMahan, the son of Joseph and Samantha McMahan, he and his parents and sponsors were given a little candle accompanied by these words, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

When we live out our lives of faith we illuminate life that otherwise would be mired in darkness, metaphorical darkness that is. Or is it?

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So then, Pastor, what are we to do? I'm so glad you asked.

When we say "I believe" that belief comes with some *expectations* as we call it in the Covenant of Baptism. I could go through those but Jesus has really boiled them down into two very succinct statements. We are to be salt and light – the salt of the earth and the light of the world – we are to be two things that the world cannot do without.

- to loose the bonds of injustice,
- to undo the thongs of the yoke,
- to let the oppressed go free,
- to break every yoke,
- to share their bread with the hungry,
- to bring the homeless poor into their houses, and
- to cover the naked

And if you want to know more specifically what that looks like, at least from antiquity, return to the First Reading where the LORD God enumerated several manifestations of what God meant. Some of them will need to be updated for our times, but when we truly are salt and light, the circumstances that would benefit from salt and light will be obvious to the faithful. And when we find ourselves in those circumstances the expectation is that we will be salt and light.

Prayer

Lord God, we count on you to be "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." And while your Son has already done all the saving the world needs, you count on us to continue his ministry of spreading the Good News of your love, grace, and mercy. He call us "the salt of the earth and the light of the world." Inspire us to live up to that high calling. We pray this in his name. Amen