

Epiphany 5A 2020 Sermon

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalms 112:1-9

Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus said, "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.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In 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.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For 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. Therefore, 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

In today's reading from Isaiah, the people of Israel have returned from exile, but things are not going well for them. So, they decide that they will do something that will please God in order to gain God's favor: they will fast; and they will lie in sackcloth and ashes, bowing their heads to the ground. God will see these sacrificial acts of devotion and be pleased, and will reward them.

But something goes wrong: they *do* these self-mortifications – and it makes no difference! They continue to experience *bad* things, even though they have humbled themselves before God with fasting and sackcloth and ashes! So, they complain to God: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

And God answers: "Look, you serve your *own* interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such 'fasting' as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call *this* a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"

God's people have misunderstood what it is that *pleases* the Lord. Acts like fasting or spreading ashes on oneself (which we will do in about 2 weeks!) do not please God if they don't go hand-in-glove with an inward change of heart, eliciting acts of compassion toward those suffering injustice, oppression, hunger,

homelessness, or lack of clothing. God continues: “Is not *this* the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (“Your own kin” being the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless, the naked, etc.)

This same theme is picked up in today’s Psalm, wherein the psalmist says that the “righteous” and “upright” are those who “are merciful and full of compassion,” “generous in lending” and “give freely to the poor.” And in our Gospel, Jesus says to his followers, “unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” What is *lacking* in the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? It turns out to be the *same* thing that is lacking in the people of Israel in our reading from Isaiah. “Hypocrites!” Jesus will later say to the Pharisees. “For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, compassion, and honesty.”¹

What God is saying that he wants from us is *integrity*, a congruence between what we *profess* to be and to believe and the way we outwardly act toward others. In our Isaiah passage, God’s argument with the people is that they *claim* to be pious and righteous, and yet they treat their hired workers oppressively, quarrel and fight with each other, and fail to act compassionately and generously toward those suffering injustice, and those who are hungry, homeless, or without adequate clothing.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells his followers (which includes you and me), “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” These are statements of fact, and are meant to overcome any lesser identities we may have of ourselves (like, “I am worthless,” or “I am mediocre,” or “I am incapable of making a difference.”) We are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world! And these identities are God-given; they did not come by any merit or effort on our part.

Now, in order to fully appreciate what Jesus is saying, we must realize how *important* salt and light were in Jesus’ day. Salt was extremely valuable. Roman soldiers were *paid* partly with salt. This is the origin of the word “salary,” coming from the Latin “*sal*,” salt. Salt was an invaluable preservative, and it gives zest and taste to foods that would otherwise be bland and lifeless – maybe not even palatable! (Have you ever drunk salt-free V8 juice or eaten salt-free popcorn?) Similarly, the importance of **light** is easy to overlook in our day when all we have to do is flip a switch on the wall to have light. But imagine yourself during a nighttime power outage, without any flashlight. Having even a small, burning oil lamp would be a godsend – especially if the power outage persisted for days (as it did in parts of California this past summer). And so, calling us “salt for the earth” and “light for the world” is saying that we are extremely

important to the world; we are of *great* value – that is, as long as our salt doesn't stay in the saltshaker or our light isn't hidden under a basket.

Salt is meant to be *used*, poured out, preserving meat and giving flavor and zest to food. Light is meant to be *used*, illuminating a dark world, bringing warmth and brightness. If salt were to lose its saltiness, or if it were kept in the saltshaker, it wouldn't be good for anything; if light is hidden and doesn't shine, it does not serve its purpose. Jesus says that you and **I** are salt for the earth and light for the world, and he *wants* that salt and light to impact the world! “Let your light shine before others,” Jesus says, “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Not give glory to ourselves, we who *perform* the works, but to the loving God who *empowers* our loving actions.

This is what gives us integrity: a congruence, a oneness between identity and loving action. Our **identity** as salt and light is not enough; it needs to be poured out for the sake of the world. In fact, in the Revised Standard translation of verse 10 in our Isaiah passage, we read: “if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.” If we are to have integrity as “Christians,” our loving actions will flow forth from our Christian identity: as salt for the earth, we will pour ourselves out for others, as Christ poured himself out for us, and for the whole world.

In the New Testament Letter of James, we are told, “...be *doers* of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ...If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”²

And yet, as Presbyterian Pastor James Sledge notes, understanding our Christian faith as *necessarily* involving pouring out ourselves in compassionate **action** can be difficult in America today. He writes: “Christian faith in America tends to be a private and personal thing. Faith is what we ‘believe.’”³ But, echoing Isaiah, we read in the Letter of James, once again, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”⁴ Pastor Sledge notes that “it was not their *beliefs* that got the Old Testament prophets [or John the Baptist or Jesus] into trouble; it was the fact that “they insisted that being God’s people demanded that they live differently than they were doing.”⁵

And is this not also true for us? Changing our accustomed way living is difficult. Richard Rohr writes: “If we’re honest, *culture* forms us much more than the

Gospel. It seems we have kept the basic storyline of human history in place rather than allow the Gospel to reframe and redirect the story. Except for those who have experienced grace *at their core*, Christianity has not created [what St. Paul called] a ‘new mind’ (Romans 12:2) or a ‘new self’ (Ephesians 4:23-24) that is significantly different than the cultures it inhabits.”⁶ (unquote) To give one example: We know we should drastically reduce our use of single-use plastic, but we resist making the changes necessary for this to happen. “A recent audit on plastic trash around the world concluded that Coca-Cola was the largest plastic polluter,”⁷ producing the equivalent of 200,000 plastic bottles each minute. And yet, at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, Coca Cola stated that people *want* plastic bottles, so they will continue to produce them.⁸ 200,000 bottles each minute.

Speaking to an international gathering this past week, Pope Francis said, “‘The world is rich but, notwithstanding this, the [number of] poor people around us is increasing... hundreds of millions of people are living in extreme poverty, lacking the bare necessities of life including food, medical care, schools, drinking water.

“Five million [children] ‘will die this year due to poverty...’ ...[Pope Francis] identified the problem as ‘the lack of will and decision to change things, and especially [to change] the priorities.’ But, he said, ‘a rich world and a vibrant economy *can* and **must** put an end to poverty.’”⁹ A rich world and a vibrant economy *can* and **must** put an end to poverty.

And, my friends, there is hope that we *can* change! We see it here in our own community. When our sheltering program was closed down, it brought the attention of the Fire Department to the great need for shelter, and they have allowed Loaves and Fishes to house 10 extra people during the cold weather. Our county was awarded a grant to implement the “Built for Zero” program to end chronic and veteran homelessness. A year-round homeless day center is being started at Mountain View Church, across the street from Loaves and Fishes, and volunteers are being sought to help people find jobs, develop skills, and get whatever counseling they may need. (See Mary Derbort for more information!) Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, “Every church should be able to get a letter of recommendation from the poor in their community.” And, my friends, I think we could get many such recommendations!

We *are* the salt of the earth: Let us pour ourselves out in loving acts. We *are* the light of the world: Let us shine, illumining the darkness in the lives of God’s people.

AMEN

1 Matthew 23:23

2 James 1:22-27

- 3 *The Christian Century*, “Salt, light and introverted congregations,” by James Sledge, May 3, 2012
- 4 James 2:14-17
- 5 Sledge, *ibid.*
- 6 Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, “An Economy of Grace,” Tuesday, May 23, 2017
- 7 *Forbes*, Oct 29, 2019, “Coca-Cola Named The World’s Most Polluting Brand in Plastic Waste Audit,” by Trevor Nace, Senior Contributor, Science
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/trevornace/2019/10/29/coca-cola-named-the-worlds-most-polluting-brand-in-plastic-waste-audit/#40c6433874e0>
- 8 BBC News, “Davos 2020: People still want plastic bottles, says Coca-Cola,” By Daniel Thomas, Business reporter, BBC News
<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51197463>
- 9 *America Magazine*, February 5, 2020, “Pope Francis: A vibrant economy must put an end to poverty,” Gerard O’Connell
<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/02/05/pope-francis-vibrant-economy-must-put-end-poverty>