

Epiphany 5, Year A,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

9th February, 2020

Isaiah 58:1-12 NRSV / Matthew 5:13-20 NRSV

How important is salt?

Well, 40 million tons are required each year to fill our needs.

Throughout time, salt has played a vital role in our lives.

In ancient Greece a far-flung trade

involving the exchange of salt for slaves

gave rise to the expression, "...not worth his salt."

Special salt rations were given to Roman soldiers,

known as "Solarium Argentums,"

the forerunner of the English word "salary."

Thousands of Napoleon's troops died during his retreat from Moscow

because their wounds would not heal--their bodies lacked salt.

The human body contains about 4oz. of salt.

Without enough of it, muscles won't contract, blood won't circulate,

food won't digest and the heart won't beat a beat.

Without a doubt, salt is the essence of life.

For thousands of years, before modern refrigeration,

salt was vital in the preservation and storage of food.

While these are interesting facts about salt,

I think most of us would recognize salt as the universal flavor enhancer.

Without salt, our food often seems bland and not very appealing.

Too much salt, and the food becomes inedible.

Yet we need the right amount for our bodies to function properly.

But salt not only adds flavor, it spices things up.

As both cooks and chemists will attest,

salt brightens and sharpens other flavors already present.

Pepper can only add more or less of a peppery taste.

Salt, if added in the right amount at the right time in the right way,

enlivens and enhances a meal's other flavors.

It brings them out.

In our sermon last week, we looked at the Beatitudes,

and how they defined the new reality ushered in by Jesus,

the attributes of the kingdom of heaven drawing near.

This week, Jesus informs his followers of their part in this new reality.

They are to be the salt of the earth.

Like the salt in our kitchens and pantries,

their job is to enhance and bring out

the best possible flavors in those they encounter.

They should bring their own flavor to the mix, of course,

spicing things up here and there.

Then, just as much, they should work to enliven other flavors,
enliven other tastes,
making the world more savory, more delicious, more beautiful.

Likewise, they are called to be the light of the world.

In our modern context, where we have light just about anywhere
with the flick of a switch, or an app on our smartphones,
we take for granted that easy access and convenience.

But, in the historical context, that is a relatively recent occurrence.

For most of our history, events of the day generally ended at nightfall.

While we had candles and oil lamps to give some illumination indoors,
if there wasn't a moon out, you didn't travel very far at night.

Yet a hillside city may guide a weary traveler on a dark night.

The lamps and candles of the house
made activity possible at home after dark.

It's also worth noting that putting a basket over a burning lamp is not only absurd;
it is also dangerous.

It involves a fundamental, even reckless understanding of what a lamp is,
how it works, and what it is for.

In our lesson today, Jesus is insisting that his disciples are not made to be hidden,
but to be shining, for illuminating, for giving light to the house.

It's a mission that, if taken seriously,
would fundamentally shift how one planned one's days,

in terms of what we do and how we do it.

Any teacher will encourage students to “do good works,” for example,

but here Jesus articulates the underlying basis for that work,

a motive and framework within which it properly takes place.

Salt enhances and brings out the flavor of other spices;

light provides light for all to see.

Do not do good works to enhance your standing and status, he seems to say;

do them because that is exactly what you are made to do.

Do them because “doing good works”

is one and the same as “being who you really are.”

Do them not to gain stature,

but rather as an outworking of the stature you already enjoy.

So what does being the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world”

mean for us as Christ’s disciples in the 21st century?

Clearly there is an expectation that we will enhance life

by who we are and our presence in the world.

But what does that look like in real terms?

Our passage from last week with the Beatitudes

can certainly give us some clues.

The expectation of us, like those first disciples,

is that we will not accept a status quo

that ignores or unfairly treats those whom God considers “blessed.”

Are we caring for those who suffer loss,

and it's not just grief in the traditional sense,

but the loss of livelihood, human rights,

or the only way of life they've ever known?

Are we seeking to do justice?

Justice for those who are oppressed, who have lost their rights,

or who never really had them to begin with?

Do we live show mercy and grace to others?

Do we live lives of integrity?

Do people look at us and see our faith in action

and would never have to ask, “is he or she a Christian?”

Are we peacemakers?

That's a big list but if we don't reflect those values, what flavor do we have?

How are we enhancing this world, here and now?

Theologian and author Brian McClaren, in his book “The Secret Message of Jesus,”

laments the empty cathedrals of Europe and the empty churches in this country.

He asks, “What went wrong in those cathedrals?”

And what is going wrong in much of the stagnant, tense,

or hyped-up religiosity of churches in my own country?.

He goes on to reflect that the Christian religion

continues to sing and preach and teach about Jesus,

but in too many places it has largely forgotten, misunderstood,
or become distracted from the message of Jesus.

He states that when we drifted

from understanding and living out his essential message of the kingdom,
we became like flavorless salt or a blown-out lightbulb —
so boring that people just walked away.

The author observes that we may have talked about going to heaven

after we die, but not about God's will being done on earth before we die.

We may have pressured people to be moral and good or correct and orthodox
to avoid hell after death, but we didn't inspire them

with the possibility of becoming beautiful and fruitful
to heal the earth in this life.

We may have instructed them about how to be a good

Brethren, Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, or Methodist on Sunday,

but we didn't train, challenge, and inspire them to live out the kingdom of
God

in their jobs, neighborhoods, families, schools, and societies between Sundays.

Brian's reflection continues by pondering

that we may have tried to make people nice, quiet citizens
of their earthly kingdoms

and energetic consumers in their earthly economies —
but we didn't fire them up and inspire them

to invest and sacrifice their time, intelligence, money, and energy
in the revolutionary cause of the kingdom of God.

No, too often, Karl Marx was right:

we used religion as a drug so we could tolerate the abysmal conditions
of a world that is not the kingdom of God.

McClaren concludes by saying that religion became our tranquilizer

so we wouldn't be so upset about injustice.

Our religiosity thus aided and abetted people in power

who wanted nothing more than to conserve and preserve
the unjust status quo that was so profitable and comfortable for them."

So how true is that of us?

Is our faith and our religion just a tranquilizer

to get us through living in a world

that is so not like the kingdom that Jesus talked about?

Does it help us to look the other way?

To be honest, it makes us sound a lot like the Pharisees of Jesus' time, doesn't it?

Pharisees looked to adapt the law and ancient religion of the Jews

to work in a world that didn't fit God's intention for how things should be.

Instead of challenging the priests and Sadducees

to exercise justice towards the poor and disenfranchised,

they turned inward, studying scripture

and debating how to apply the law

without upsetting the apple cart

under the Romans and Jewish elite.

They encouraged keeping to their own community and the synagogues,
and not making waves.

How much are our churches places for us to hide from the problems of the world?

Do we, like the Pharisees, seek solace in studying our scriptures and praying,
but don't actively seek to undo the injustice around us?

Studying scripture is certainly not a bad thing,

but the problem arises when our study of scripture
replaces living up to our responsibility to be the salt of the earth.

It becomes a problem when we become bland Christians

who show up on Sunday but put our faith aside the rest of the week.

If our lights cannot be seen outside of the church building,

what illumination do they provide to the world?

Sadly, when our pews were full of young families

and we were the center of community life,

we turned our light inward and made our focus

the church programs and activities for those on the inside.

Then when the children grew up and moved on, we found those pews empty,

and we were no longer the center of our community's life.

So do we send our lights into the dark parts of our world

by standing up for the least of these:

the poor, the widow and the orphan; the foreigner residing among us;
the refugee?

Or do we hide our lights in our living rooms, or our church buildings,
and pray that God will work it all out.

The problem with prayer alone,

is that God often selects people to accomplish the Divine will.

If we all take the attitude that it's "someone else's" calling,

who is there left to be God's tool in changing the status quo?

We all have gifts and we all have limitations as well.

But God has a role for each and every one of us..

Each and every day we all have the opportunity

to add good flavor to the world around us,

to enhance the flavor of others

by how we choose to act

and how we choose to interact with and treat others.

You can shine your light out into the world.

Your salt can have flavor.

It doesn't have to be bland.

Unlike the believers of first century Palestine,

we aren't trying to resist the influence and military might of our foreign overlords.

But we do have those who are privileged and those who are not,

many of whom struggle under crippling hardships and inequality.

Jesus is telling us we are called to make a difference,
to change the priorities of this world.

But silent voices, like bland salt and dim lights make little difference.

Jesus calls us in our passage today to seek righteousness.

The law and the prophets still apply.

Too often we tend to focus on the law and push the prophets to the side.

Again, it's the struggle of personal piety versus social injustice.

The morality laws and codes from the Torah

mainly concern our own actions

and how we handle ourselves in our own lives.

It's about being truthful, ethical, and having integrity.

But the writings of the prophets are largely about

how we treat and care for others.

How do we treat the foreigner in our land?

What provisions do we make for the poor, the sick, the homeless?

Do all people have the same rights as we?

Sometimes I look at the news, at the people on the street,

and can't help noticing the dimness, the lack of light.

I see the blandness all around.

Where are the values of Christ reflected?

Noted author and minister Robert Fulghum tells about attending a conference

where he heard a powerful lecture by the Greek philosopher, teacher,

peacemaker & politician, Alexandros Popaderos.

Everybody was deeply moved by what the lecturer had said.

At end of the lecture, Popaderos asked, "Are there any questions?"

There was this awestruck silence. Nobody said a word.

Then, Fulghum, always the jokester, said, "I've got a question!

Dr. Papaderos, tell us the meaning of life?"

Everybody laughed and started to gather up their things to leave.

But the lecturer said, "Wait a moment; sit down, please..."

I will tell you about the meaning of life...."

Popaderos removed from his wallet a tiny round mirror

about the size of a quarter.

He told the story of how, as a child during WWII,

he'd lived in tremendous poverty. He didn't have any toys.

One day he was walking down a road

and he saw the wreckage of a German motorcycle.

It's mirror was cracked,

the pieces of the broken mirror littering the roadway.

He said, "I tried to gather up all the pieces of the mirror

and put it back together again, but I couldn't find all the pieces,

so I took the biggest piece & by scratching it on a stone, I made it round.

This is it." (He held it up for all to see.)

"It became for me a wonderful toy.

My fun was to reflect the light of the sun
into the darkest places I could find.

Whenever I'd get bored, I would pull out this little mirror
and I would reflect sun in places where light had never been."

He said, "As I grew up, this became the metaphor of what I could do with my life."

"I'm not the light," he said.

"I'm a reflector of light and my job is to get light into the darkest of places."

Are we shining our lights into the darkest of places?

Can our lights be seen outside of our churches and homes?

And how about our flavor?

Do we enhance the flavor of our world,
or have we become bland, and not of any value,
worthy of being discarded underfoot?

If our entry into the kingdom is dependent on our righteousness here and now,

I pray we all work to reflect His light

and bring flavor and goodness into a world that has grown so bland and dark.

Amen.