

Epiphany 5-A
February 5, 2023
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Isaiah 58: 1-12

Psalm 112: 1-9

I Corinthians 2: 1-12

Matthew 5: 13-20

In this season of Epiphany, we are reminded again and again about the Light of Christ—the Epiphany of God. We keep our little star above the sanctuary lit through Epiphany, and we have our icon to remind us every week that Christ is the light of the world. Today we get it again in the gospel along with salt, but this time it is we who are the light to the world and salt to the world.

In the gospel Jesus starts off by talking about salt. He says this rather curious phrase...." If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" Now for us in the modern age, we know that Sodium Chloride is just simply two elements that together form what we know as salt, together they cannot be but what they are. To the ancients, who made salt from the sea or mined salt, there were often biological things hanging on, that if rotted, well, you got rotten salt! This is what Jesus was talking about.

But let's play with the metaphor of salt a little bit....what does salt do? What immediately comes to mind is that it helps season or flavor things....in fact many chefs will say that it brings out the flavor of

something. Ah, yes, so we, as salt, can bring out the flavor of the world and people around us as we live faithfully as followers of Christ. Well, there's a nice image.

But what is another thing that salt does and did so for generations in a most important way? It preserves! Any of you who do some canning will know the power of salt in food preservation. Generations of Americans and Europeans benefitted from salted cod and other fish as a food staple. I remember when living in Sept-Iles, Quebec, there were a number of Newfoundlanders who had come over to work on the railroad and the iron mines in the interior of Quebec, and those who had grown up on what they call, 'The Rock', still knew salt cod as a staple, and in some sense a delicacy of their cuisine...that and cod tongues! So, there's another good metaphor for us – the ones who work to preserve the world. But of course, there is nuance in this, over-exposure to salt can kill things.....think TV preachers!

Salt can also be used in healing in a variety of ways....most of us know this through gargling with salt water with a sore throat, or soaking your feet in Epsom salts; it is also necessary to balance liquids in your body, especially for muscles. So, we, as salt, can be God's instrument of healing.

But there is another function of salt that us New Englanders know very well, especially after this last week---it melts ice and snow! Here is a very timely metaphor for us who follow Christ! If we will, if we dare, if we persevere, we can help to melt the hearts of those who have been frozen by fear, hatred, politics, enmity, despair, etc. I really think this country needs our saltiness in this way more than ever! We are all fraught with distrust

and anger and clenched fists....and as an old Chinese proverb says: The one who clenches the fist can receive nothing.

“Well,” you may ask, “how do we do that?” You say you are not that very clever and could never really ‘preach’ to anyone, so what should we do? Let’s take Paul’s answer and unpack it a little which might provide us some example.....

Paul was writing to the Corinthian church after visiting there. He was in maybe his 15th year of missionary work and an experienced preacher. He starts off this passage of the letter saying that he came to them without lofty words and wisdom. If you remember where he was just before coming to them you will understand. He had just come from Athens, the seat of higher learning in the empire---a legacy of the Greeks to the Roman empire. There philosophy, wisdom, the sophists were the elite, and Paul deigned to engage them in the Areopagus – a city square, if you will, where people met to teach and debate. Paul, in spite of all his learning, failed miserably before them and was kind of laughed out of town. He tried to ‘reason’ with them with all the knowledge and wisdom that he had. He failed.

With his tail between his legs he meandered off to Corinth where he decided that all his fancy talk really got him nowhere.....so, he :decided to now nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.” Huh?, doesn’t sound so cocky now, eh? Why? “so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.” The rest of the passage Paul goes off into a little treatise on God’s wisdom being secret and hidden. In

this way he almost sounds like the Gnostics, but the point of all this is that in some sense, it is hidden in plain sight. Christ crucified was the big problem for most people....as he says later on in this chapter “a stumbling block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Gentiles”.

What sort of ‘god’ dies for humans? And yet it is not just as simple as a god dying for humans, but a God who shows us the way to be fully alive through self-sacrifice. This is Paul getting back to his mystical self and his experience of Christ following him from his Damascus road experience. This sort of wisdom is not of this world, and if we have wakened to the Spirit in us, as he says at the conclusion of this passage, we will understand the gifts bestowed on us by God! This is again his clarion call to ‘wake up, wake up, wake up’ you who are salt and light.

At this point I know some of you are saying, ‘geez, I better get to church more often ‘cause this is all so far-out and confusing!’ Well, maybe; but as I am fond of saying, if all you’re doing when coming to church is getting your little ‘Jesus pill’ every Sunday, then you are not getting it--- you are not realizing your light-filled, salty nature. The voice of God from Isaiah is a good corrective about mindless church-going and pretend Christianity. Yahweh says:

“ 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 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? Then 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.”

So of course, being salt and light we are meant to share it! Just as Jesus said in this gospel passage---don't lose your saltiness, don't hide your light under a basket – it was meant to shine! The nature of light is to help you and others to 'see', and the nature of salt is to preserve, season, heal and melt!

Someone in the parish recently said to me that they just have a hard time sharing their faith---it's just not how she was raised and it feels off-putting. I reminded her of that great quote from St. Francis, who, when one of his brothers asked him why he didn't preach more, he replied, “Oh, I preach all the time, sometimes I use words.” Now don't let that be an excuse for you never sharing your faith! But the great thing about being Episcopalian is that we say right up front we don't have the corner on the truth. What I hope each of you can say is that in some wonderful and mysterious way being a follower of Jesus helps you to be more fully alive and have an abiding peace and joy---maybe not every moment of every day, but it's there.

As people of salt and light we were meant to be shared---to enlighten situations with calm and loving attention, to season the world with tastiness for those who have lost all desire to taste, to heal where healing is

needed, to preserve the goodness of God in all creation and in our brothers and sisters around us, to melt the hearts of those who have grown bitter and angry at God or others.

One of the great ways we can do this is by not losing our sense of humor. Humor has a great way of taking the steam out of a room and uniting us all in some common laughter. Yesterday I was listening to the radio and there was a Palestinian woman comedian in an interview talking about her comedy. She said that one of her principal aims of her comedy is 'keeping it delightful', but also using it as a vehicle to open people's hearts to others, and particularly to Palestinians and Muslims. She tells a story in her stand up act about being stripped search by Israeli security guards, she didn't tell the story on the radio, but said that in spite of the awfulness of it, there was something in the story that was just really funny (I would love to know what that was!), and she said that afterward she often gets people coming up to her in America/the West and saying, 'Gee, I never knew that Palestinians were just people, I always just heard they were a terrorist group.' Another example of her humor is that she says in her routine in a very serious tone, "Do you know what gets Palestinians and Israelis really riled up, and even between Palestinians and between Jews---well, it's who has the best falafel!"

Well, I'm not sure if humor is salt or light, but I think that maybe we all need to be just a little 'lightly salted' with humor.

So, I haven't really come up with a clever conclusion today, but the most important conclusion is what you will take away. What will you take away from this little meditation on us as salt and light?