

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

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
Midway Presbyterian Church
February 5, 2023

Salt and Light

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

This Fifth Sunday of Epiphany we hear a great prophet condemn a worship that is preoccupied with ritual, while blind to human need and oppression. Listen to these words from Isaiah 58:1-12...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson we hear Jesus use the metaphors of “salt” and “light” to teach his disciples that they are not to simply retreat into a private spirituality. They have something to do, and do openly. They are to practice the same commitments that Isaiah called for in our Old Testament Lesson. Listen to these familiar words from Matthew 5:12-20...

Sermon

Who are you disciples of Christ here at Midway? According to Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount, you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world—the “you” being plural. For the tasks of ministry and mission cannot be accomplished entirely by independent Christians.

It is said that the most difficult task a coach undertakes is to so challenge his team that each player measures up to his full potential, each game. And perhaps the most effective way to challenge an athlete is to compliment him or her on what they can be if they give their all. When Jesus declared, “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world,” he presented his disciples with the greatest challenge, as well as the highest compliment.

“You are the salt of the earth.” Now salt was greatly valued in the ancient world. A bag of salt was as precious as a person’s life. The Greeks called it “divine.” And in the time of Jesus salt was associated with three special qualities.

First, it was associated with *purity*. Partly this was true because of its glistening whiteness. The Romans said salt was the purest of all things, because it came from the purest of all things, the sun and the sea. When Jesus says you are the salt of the earth, one thing he means is that our lives must exemplify purity. There’s a lot of talk today about the lowering of standards—standards of morality, of diligence in work, of thoughtfulness. Disciples of Christ are to hold aloft the standard of purity.

Second, salt was connected with *preservation*. In the climate of Palestine salt was necessary for the preservation of food. Without it food would spoil. It is easy for society to become corrupt. Greed, envy, hatred, lust, indifference, cruelty, lead to decay. These are the forces of death, and they are not stayed unless some folk are salt.

As with food preparation, it doesn’t take much salt to do the job. Christians are instructed not to withdraw, but to stay in the world, touching even its unworthy side, that it might be redeemed. The call is not to a sensational witness. Remember, salt is inconspicuous, ordinary—a common thing. So, the call is for a day-by-day, inconspicuous, but faithful witness to Christ and his teachings.

In the Great Commission found at the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus commissioned his followers to go into all the world and make disciples, *baptizing* in the name of the Holy Trinity and *teaching obedience* to his commands. Not hiding what has been revealed to us, but practicing and proclaiming it. Not just in church, but also in the world. Not just here at Midway, but also in Anderson, and Clinton, and on the border with Mexico and in China. *Purity*. *Preservation*.

Third, salt was thought of as that which gives *flavor* to things. Without salt food can be dull, insipid. The idea is that Christians are to lend flavor to life as salt lends flavor to food. A great tragedy is that too often the opposite has been true—Christians have taken the flavor out of life.

Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes explained his choice of a career by saying, “I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.” Best known for *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Scottish novelist, Robert Louis Stevenson, once wrote in his diary, as if he were recording an amazing phenomenon, “I have been to Church today, and I am not depressed.”

We need to embrace the abundant life and joy that Christ came to bring us. We are to give flavor to life. We are to make a difference in life, even as salt makes a difference when added to food. Salt: *purity, preservation, flavor*.

Disciples of Christ are given a vision, “You are the salt of the earth.” Then they are given a warning, “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 underfoot.”

In our Old Testament lesson for today Isaiah mocks a worship preoccupied with ritual, but blind to human need. Authentic worship occurs when the liturgy of the worship hour is joined to a hands-on involvement with the poor and the hungry—as we seek to do today through the jar offering to Clean Start, as a number of you do each month in delivering Meals on Wheels.

The warning in Isaiah and Matthew is that any church or denomination that adapts itself completely to the values of the world around it is rendered useless. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world as we genuinely proclaim and demonstrate that Christ is Lord. Not by mouthing theological platitudes, but a commitment to mission and ministry—to the task of being the church in the world. A church that does not exhibit purposeful witness, warm evangelism,

lowly service, openness to people who are different, care for the unborn and the born, the young, as well as the old and frail, self-discipline in stewardship—such a church falls short of Christ’s instruction.

“You are the salt of the earth,” *and* “You are the light of the world.” Jesus not only placed a great responsibility on his followers by saying that we are the light of the world, but he also paid a great tribute. He said of himself that he is the light of the world. And here he says that we are to be what he is.

Now the Jews who heard Jesus speak these words heard a familiar expression. For they spoke of Jerusalem as “a light to the Gentiles.” In Isaiah we read:

I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations. (42:6)

Hymn writer and poet Annie Flint wrote a poem entitled “The World’s Bible,” where she said:

We are the only Bible
The careless world will read,
We are the sinner’s gospel
We are the scoffers creed;
We are the Lord’s last message
Given in deed and word,
What if the type is crooked?
What if the print is blurred?

Now we know that a light is visible. In Palestine the houses were very dark with only a small circular window. The lamp was like a sauceboat filled with oil with a wick floating in it. In those days without matches, it wasn’t easy to rekindle a lamp. So when the people left home, they would take the lamp from the lamp stand, and as a safety measure, put it under an earthen bushel.

While the call is not to be a sensational witness, Christians are to be visible—light for the world, like a city set on a hill. Our light is to shine before people that seeing our good works they may give glory—not to us, the church, the minister—but to God. Jesus calls us to be a light, pushing back the darkness, reflecting the glory of God, drawing people unto himself.

Of course, there are many ways to reflect God's light. Katie was a physics major who got her master's degree in water and environmental management. Then she went to Central Asia where she helped ten villages develop or improve water supplies, equipping community members to maintain them, and educating local women on the importance of hygiene.

Eric was a middle school teacher in an inner-city Chicago charter school, where teachers kept their students focused on college by naming their classrooms after their alma maters. Eric and his wife rehabbed an old drug house they purchased.

Mary was a housewife who cared for her four children, often by herself, as her husband's work took him out of town several days a week. If he was away on Sunday, still she took the children with her to church.

Due to infirmity, Bill could no longer come to church services. But when the pastor visited, he told him that the newsletter, the bulletin, and the recorded services helped him continue to feel a part of things. And he assured the pastor that he prayed for him and the church every day.

For sure, all of these Christians, in different ways, reflect the light of Christ, and are in fact a light themselves.

Furthermore, we know that a light serves as a guide. How comforting it is to one lost in the wilderness of a storm-filled night, to have a light to guide him to safety. How comforting it is to a soul lost in the wilderness of sin to have the example and encouragement of a faithful disciple to lead him to Christ. *A light. A guide.*

And thirdly, we behold the innate excellence of light in its capacity to heal. Sunlight has the ability to help heal wounds and strengthen feeble bodies. It provides us with vital Vitamin D. Malachi prophesied:

But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise,
with healing in its wings. (4:2)

Be assured, the gospel of Jesus Christ can be a source of healing for a person sinking deep in sin, yes, for a sin-sick world. Light: *A reflection of God. A guide. A source of healing.*

“You are the light of the world. I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind.” A great privilege—an awesome responsibility.

My friends, we are children of God. The light that we diffuse is from a heavenly source, like that of the stars. Jesus, the light of the world, is the source of spiritual light to guide the lost to salvation (2 Cor. 4:3-6). And we, his disciples, reflect his light to the people of the world, people who might not know him except for us. (2 Cor. 3:18)

Seeing this light, people can learn of a God of love and truth. A God who requires of all that we do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with him. People can learn of a still more excellent way. Of a life for time and for all eternity. God gives us a vision—of himself—in Jesus Christ. We disciples of Christ, let us just be who Jesus says we are—the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.