

Salt and Light

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

Feb. 6, 2005

Last week when we were looking at the Beatitudes I quoted someone who said, “ God doesn’t bless us just to make us happy, God blesses us to make us a blessing.” Well, the way Matthew tells it, just after Jesus tells the disciples how they are blessed he looks at them and says these words:

“You (plural) , you disciples are the salt of the earth. You disciples are the light of the world.” And that’s what he says to us today as well. These are metaphors for what Christians are. Salt and light are very different from each other. Salt and light function very differently. And Jesus says both salt and light have something to tell us about the way we are to be in the world.

First we are salt. One of the interesting characteristics of salt is that it brings out the flavor of other foods. Used correctly, it doesn’t call attention to itself; rather it helps other foods be better, it brings out the best in them. I heard Nancy Wiens--St. John speak yesterday, so I confess my sermon today will be “salted” by what she said. Nancy told us about a friend she has, saying “Every time she sees me I feel blessed because the way she sees me calls out the goodness in me.” A few years ago there was a bumper sticker that read, “Seek the good and praise it.” As salty Christians then, we are to go into the world and bring out the best of everything and everyone we meet.

Another interesting characteristic is that salt is a preservative. It was used in Jesus’ time more than it is now to keep food for a long time. So we are to preserve and protect people--especially the ones who need it most--the vulnerable, the poor, those with aids, the oppressed. Jesus message echoes

and underscores the words of Isaiah. “Don’t come to me with your religious rituals, with your fasts and prayers--the fast I choose is to loose the bonds of wickedness to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share you bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into you house, when you see the naked to cover him. “

In our adult education class we read about Christians who lived out this message. Leanne Van Dyk recounts in her book a story she read by Philip Haillie. This is what she says:

Haillie tells the story of a French Reformed pastor in Southern France during the perilous years of Nazi occupation. The pastor, Andre Trocme and his congregation organized together to save the lives of thousands of Jews by hiding them in secret shelter and hidden rooms in their own homes.

She goes on to say that even when a church official ordered Trocme to stop assisting the Jews he refused. What a wonderful example of being salt to the world!

One other thing about salt--it doesn’t work unless it’s spread around. Some years ago there was a book called Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World. Salt has to get lost to work. Salt doesn’t draw attention to itself.

But light is a different matter. Jesus said it himself--you can’t hide a city up on a hill. You don’t try to cover a lamp up by putting it under a bushel basket. The whole point of lighting a lamp is pushing back the darkness, and you have to let it shine if you want that to happen.

I want you to notice two things about this light. You might expect that

talking about the light a Christian shines on the world is our witness--what we used to be called our testimony. You might expect that Jesus is calling us to try to win people over by our words. But no--that's not what he says. He says instead, "Let people see your good works." So we're back to Isaiah again... we're to be feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, letting the oppressed go free, THEN says Isaiah--our light will break forth like the dawn!

Again, Nancy Weins talked about living in Marin County where most people have been turned off by church and by Christians. "My most effective witness." she said, "is being the presence of God in the concrete details of every day. That means simple things like letting someone go in front of me in the grocery line, smiling at the people I meet, thanking the clerk who helps me in the store." When we start thinking about all the ways big and small that we can be the presence of Christ in the world it's unclear whether we're being salt scattered or small warm burning candles. It doesn't matter much which metaphor we use. We'll be making a difference.

And it will all be to the glory of God. People will see what we do and give God the glory. Every time I go to the Getty museum I visit Van Gogh's magical painting of the iris's. I stand before it each time and marvel at it's beauty--the colors, the brushstrokes--everything about it intrigues me. But my admiration of the painting always calls me to a greater appreciation--a greater awe of the painter--of Van Gogh himself. Looking at the work leads me to think of and be grateful for its creator. So it is with us--when we let our light shine--people will see what we do and be lead to give God the glory.

Last week I heard a song about letting our light shine. I want you to hear it now. As you listen, please notice that near the end the singer mentions us as

family, shining our lights all together.

**There is a candle in every soul
Some burning brightly, some dark and cold.
There is a spirit who brings a fire
Ignites a candle and makes his home.**

**Frustrated brother, see how he tried to
Light his own candle some other way;
And see how your sister she's been robbed and lied to
Still holds a candle without a flame.**

**We are a family whose hearts are blazing,
So let's raise our candles and light the sky
Praying to our father in the name of Jesus
Make us a beacon in darkest times.**

**Carry your candle, run to the darkness
Seek out the helpless, confused and torn
And hold out your candle for all to see it
Take you candle and go light your world.
Take your candle and go light your world.**

One final thing Jesus doesn't say we should be salt, he says we ARE salt. He doesn't say we should be light, we ARE light. We are to be ourselves--we are to be who we are as Christians. But we can become impure and lose our saltiness. We can burn out and lose the light.

That's why we come to this table. This table is the place where Christ

purifies and renews us, where he feeds us and relights our fire. Come to the table, be renewed, and nourished and fed.

Amen