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February 6, 2011 • Fifth Sunday after Epiphany (A)

Isaiah 58:1-9a
1 Corinthians 2:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20

We say many things to one another. Some of them are wonderful. “You are my best friend.” “You are the love of my life.” “You are a promising student – keep up the good work.” Others are... well, not as helpful. “You’re a loser.” “I hate you.” “You drive me crazy.” The words often sink in when we’re not paying attention, to burn or bless. Words shape how we understand ourselves. Words help form the people who we become.



Our gospel speaks different words to us today – special ones. Jesus looked at the large group of people around him. His closest friends and disciples were there. A crowd of other followers had gathered to hear him teach. He blessed their normal, every day lives, with the beatitudes that we heard last Sunday. He named the truth of some of the hard times in their lives as disciples, when God drew especially close to them. He encouraged them as followers, to see their lives from God’s perspective.

Then Jesus considered the people, themselves. He pondered who they were as followers, worshiping and learning about God. He took in what their lives were about.

He said, “You are the salt of the earth.” (*Mt. 5:13*) Salt was, and still is, very important in daily life. It seasoned and preserved food. Even in the Old Testament, salt purified bad water, just as in some of our water filters. (*2Kg 2:19-22*) Ezekiel described salt serving a role in Israel’s worship practices (*Ezek. 43:24*) It was so valuable that its presence ratified covenants (*2 Chr. 13:5*) and could be used to pay workers for their work.¹ Salt changed the things around it, bringing treasure to them all. To be as salt is to be a blessing for those around. To be salt is to have the ability to transform nutrition and taste, health and relationships, work and worship. To be salt is quite a bit more exciting than it sounds at first.

Jesus said, “You are the light of the world.” (*Mt. 5:14*) There would have been many connotations for his listeners. In this season after Epiphany, we remember Jesus as the light of the world. But at the time, the occupying force, the Roman Empire, advertised itself as a light to the world. Closer to faith, Jews understood Torah (or the first five books of our Old Testament) as God’s means of sharing light with people. Jesus takes this often-used metaphor, and shifts the focus. It is not just the five books of Jewish law that is God’s light. You are, too. You are a means of sharing God’s covenant relationship and grace with the world. Much more so than any ruling power could be.



¹ Barbara Reid, O.P., *The New Collegeville Bible Commentary, The Gospel According to Matthew* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 35 as cited in Alyce M. McKnezie, A “Salt and Light” Job Description: Reflections on Matthew 5:13-16,

These ideas may be much more common for us, as 21st century Christians. Living them out is not any easier. But if you have spent time in church, I hope they are not new.

The prophet Isaiah probably stretches us, as we imagine what it looks like for us to be salt or light now. Back in the 6th century B.C.E., God spoke through Isaiah to correct some misunderstandings of the Jewish people. They had returned from exile in Babylon, and were reestablishing their religious life at home, with the temple close at hand. They must have been really glad to return to their worship and liturgical life. Isaiah's words make it sound like they poured themselves into prayer and fasting. But they did these things while they ignored other parts of their lives. They "serve[d] their own interest" and "oppress[ed] all [their] workers." (*Isa. 58:3*) They quarreled and fought and struck one another.

Their worship and piety had become separated from the rest of their lives. The people of Israel were not remembering their past. They were God's people, who had been delivered from slavery, who had been graciously fed by God with bread from heaven, who had been homeless refugees, who had been blessed with hospitality in the desert. The stories of their faith should have led them to worship with their whole lives.

Isaiah spoke, sharing God's vision of the life of faith:

"Is this not the fast (*or worship*) 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 dawn shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly..." *(Isa. 58:6-8)*

Worshiping the God of Israel is more than prayers, or fasting, or sacrifices. Worship involves allowing faith to shape one's entire life. It calls forth a commitment to live the priorities of God, and to participate in God's visions and dreams for the world.

That was the case for the Jewish people in Isaiah's time, and that's the case for us, too. Jesus looks at us and sees "salt" and "light". But our salt and light aren't just as smiling companions in our relationships with others. At their best, our salt and light reflect that we are disciples of Jesus Christ – releasing others from the power that hold them (and us all) captive, offering forgiveness, welcoming them into right relationships with the world.

At their best, our salt and light share God's grace in food, clothing, and hospitality to the poor. That's why we make today the "Souper" Bowl of Caring. That's why our congregation gives part of the Christmas and Easter offerings to local organizations who are serving with Christ. That's why we collect food for the food pantry. That's why our congregation

shares from its abundance during Advent. That's why we serve with refugees on Troy Hill. That's why we take the time to deliver meals on wheels, to visit hospitals or prisons, to teach children who need help.

As individuals, and as a church, we give of ourselves because we recognize all the gifts of God that we have received in Jesus Christ. As baptized Christians, we have been drawn into the mission of Christ in the world – “to bring good news the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (*Lk 4:18-19, which quotes Isaiah*) There is so much injustice around us; there are so many poor, in all sorts of ways. The possibilities are endless for faithful disciples.



“You are the salt of the earth.” (*Mt. 5:13*) “You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (*Mt. 5:14, 16*) We are, and we are becoming, something wonderful in Jesus' eyes, and in God's world. May that be so. Amen.