

A Sermon for the
5th Sunday after Epiphany
February 6, 2011
Texts: Isaiah 58:1-9a
Matthew 5:13-20

“Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they
were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance
of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near
to God. ‘Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you
do not notice?’ 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 the fast that I choose, a day to humble yourself? Is it to bow down the head
like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day
acceptable to the LORD? 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, and the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you
shall call and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say,
Here I am.” Isaiah 58:1-9a

“You are the salt of the earth; 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
under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand,
and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before
others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in
heaven. Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come
not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away,
not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until it is all
accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments,
and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven;
but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of
heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and
Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:13-20

“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. So let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.” Last week, Jesus welcomed his disciples and the crowds to the mountain with a blessing. The blessings of the kingdom of heaven are yours. Because the kingdom is near. This is especially good news for the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourning, the hungry and thirsty, everyone who is in need, who is suffering or afflicted, for God is particularly concerned for your needs and comes with his compassion, mercy, peace, and comfort. You are the blessed of God. We are the blessed of God, because God has welcomed us into his kingdom. We are blessed so that we may be a blessing.

Today’s segment of the Sermon on the Mount might be called the summary statement, or maybe the purpose statement, for Jesus’ sermon. Which in reality is something more than a sermon. It’s more like a lecture. Jesus will be teaching at length on a variety of topics. We will get into the actual teaching part of the sermon starting next Sunday. Today the segment we read is focusing on who we are and why we need to listen to his teaching.

Jesus says that we are the blessed of God which makes us “the salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.” Jesus has intentions for us. He has selected two metaphors to describe who we are, salt and light, but along with this description of who we are comes a somewhat unvoiced intention that who we are also involves something to do. “Salt of the earth” is one of a number of phrases that have been lifted from the Sermon on the Mount and become part of modern usage. In modern usage it has come to be a description of someone who is humble and unpretentious. Not a bad thing, even traits that seem to line up with what we heard in the Beatitudes, blessed are the meek. But perhaps not exactly what Jesus desired or intended when he described his followers as salt of the earth. I think “salt of the earth,” in its biblical usage, was a much more active image. More along the lines of when you might say someone is quite a “salty fellow.” Somebody with a little edge. One scripture scholar suggested that a different spice might better capture the idea for our time, “you are the red chili pepper of the earth.”

The role of salt in life seems to have changed quite a bit since biblical times. Unlike our time when the main concern with salt is whether we are getting too much of it in our diet, it played a fairly important and prominent role in the ancient world. It was highly valued as a spice, an enhancer of flavor, but also as a preservative, for its usefulness in healing, and as an additive to fuel as a catalyst to improve burning. Because of its value salt even was sometimes used as currency. Soldiers were sometimes paid in salt, “if they were worth their salt.” We get our word salary from a latin word for salt, *salarium*. So, to be salt of the earth is to be of special value to the world, to enhance, preserve, protect, and renew life. We sustain our saltiness by living in a public way the life of the kingdom. What that entails is yet to be explained.

The second metaphor Jesus uses to describe us is light, “you are the light of the world.” The light metaphor seems a lot more accessible, much more understandable, than salt. Other than we are so familiar with John’s gospel where Jesus describes himself as the light of the world. And if Jesus is the light of the world, how can you or I possibly be? Well, first of all, be aware that the word “you,” in the original greek, is plural. Jesus is referring to the whole group. You all, the whole community, is the light of the world. Together, our light is to enlighten the world. This is an idea that is much older than Jesus. This is an understanding of the Jewish community that has been passed down from one generation to the next ever since Abraham, the father of the

Jewish people. From even before there was a Jewish people, God made a promise to Abraham and Sarah, that from them he was going to create a great and numerous people, he was going to make a great nation out of them, and they would be God's light to the nations. This was picked up by Abraham's descendants down to the prophets like Isaiah who reminded the exiled people of Israel, despairing in Babylon, that God had not abandoned them. God had not forgotten the promise he had made. And he would indeed bring them back home and restore their nation and make them the light to the nations he had intended them to be. Their light would break forth like the dawn. The nations would see their wonderful life, the riches and wisdom of their nation, and come streaming to Jerusalem to worship God, to be part of the blessed kingdom.

So when Jesus looked for ways to describe to his followers who they were going to be, there was no metaphor more obvious than the age old mission of his people, be a light to the nations, a light to the world. The meaning of the light metaphor is pretty clear. The light and darkness contrast was as old as day and night. Goodness lived in the light, evil hid itself in the darkness. Learning, knowledge, wisdom, even life, is enlightenment. The gospel of John talks of the light that was coming into the world, the light that was the life of all people. And, of course, we know well that without light there wouldn't be much life. Those who are ignorant, uninformed, are "in the dark." The biblical use of the metaphor extends to the image of the light or lamp that guides our steps, the word of God is like a lamp unto our feet, lighting the path before us. St. Paul frequently spoke of Jesus' followers as the people of the light, exhorting them to "walk in the light" and not "in darkness."

As salt and light Jesus wants us to influence the world with our presence, our way of living, our good works, such that the communities in which we live are enhanced, changed, by our presence. That the way we live, both individually and together as a congregation, would enlighten the world to an alternative way of being, or relating to others, God's way. And I guess, if you can be "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" humbly and unpretentiously, all the better. Jesus does go on to say, "let your light so shine before others that they see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." To God be the glory, not to ourselves.

It seems like quite a challenge Jesus has placed on we poor, meek, hungry and thirsty for God's righteousness people, naming us to be salt and light, calling us to be change agents and catalysts for transformation in the world. How in the world are we supposed to do it? Well, there's no big mystery about it, Jesus says. God provided his commands, his Torah, ages ago, to guide how we are to live with one another and with him. He has come not to abolish any of them, but rather to fulfill them, that is, to teach us and show us how to live them completely. We are to learn from him so that we can live and teach them to others, and in that way be salt and light for the kingdom. Then, in a bit of criticism of his opponents, he says, "your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees." Jesus has declared who we are, salt and light. Salt of the earth and light of the world live with exceeding righteousness. In the rest of the sermon he will elaborate on this righteousness. In the coming Sundays we will be hearing some of it. God has declared us to be salt and light. May God guide and empower us to do it. Amen