

Year A: Epiphany 5a Is 5:1-12; Ps 112; 1Cor 2:1-16; Mt 5:13-20
St. Barnabas, Florissant – February 09, 2020

Focus Sentence: We HAVE to be the salt of the earth, the light of/to the world.

SERMON

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit....

This morning, Jesus tells us Christians that we are (AND that we are to BE) salt for the earth. In other words, just like actual salt, we're to give flavor and zest to the life around us. This teaching of Jesus has lost some of its "saltiness" by being naturalized or familiarized into the English language through the expression we use about some people: "That person is really salt of the earth." Someone suggested once that, if we want a real sense of how strange that phrase likely sounded to Jesus' original listeners, we could change it to say, "You are hot pepper sauce for the whole earth!" Those of you who know how much I like hot pepper sauce can imagine how that image really appeals to me; and yet, even it doesn't quite carry the same seriousness as Jesus' original salt image.

After all, while hot pepper sauce tastes good and zesty (at least to those of us who really like it), it isn't the necessity for life that salt is. Salt doesn't just add flavor, but it preserves things; particularly in Jesus' day, it was the ONLY means for preserving meat or fish. Interestingly, in Latin, salt is "*sal*," and Roman soldiers were issued a daily ration of this necessary commodity, called the "*salarium*." Just how necessary this "*salarium*" was to life itself might be appreciated more when you also discover that our English word, "salary," derives directly from the Latin "*salarium*."

PAUSE

What I believe Jesus is trying to tell his listeners on the mountain (Remember that this morning's passage is a continuation of the "sermon on the mount") and that Jesus is telling us Christians today, is that we must be that very common, but essential, commodity, and that we're to act as zesty flavoring, as preserver of good things, as purifier, and as a necessary part of a good sacrifice to God. Just as salt does for food, we Christians are to be reminders to people of the real goodness of God's Kingdom; we're to call their attention to it and, just like salt, remember that this has nothing to do with *status* (as in, "You are the world's ethical elite"), but only with *function* (as in, "You must add zest to the life of the world.")

PAUSE

Jesus goes on to teach us Christians that being disciples of Jesus means being exposed to the vision of the whole world: "You are LIGHT to the world." Of course, during this Epiphany season of light, it's entirely appropriate that we once again be reminded of our job to "manifest" or "show forth" Jesus to a world that is all too dark and which is in dire need of this light. What that might mean for us in 2020 and beyond could put tremendous and unusual demands on us. In preparation work for this sermon, it came to my attention that just prior to the beginning of the "sermon on the mount," it is noted by Matthew that Jesus' fame had spread throughout all *Syria*. It's probably the case that many in Jesus' audience were, guess what? *Syrians*! Our calling to be light to the world today might well require Christians in some way to stand up for *Syrians* and *Iraqis* and *Somalis*, and for others from those parts of our dark world.

In any case, it's appropriate to remind ourselves that we're not ourselves the LIGHT, but only windows, or mirrors, or reflectors of the true Light which is Jesus. Paul put this very beautifully when he told the Corinthians in his second letter to them, "...we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it might be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

PAUSE

Jesus drives home this command to Christians by telling us that we're to be like a city set on a hill. Unfortunately, there's a side to our human nature that causes us to crave being SEEN, and our vanity feeds that very craving. Our motive for being seen has to come rather from our very vivid awareness of the greatness and goodness of God. We're called to manifest, to reflect, that goodness through our good works, as Jesus himself reminds us: "...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

PAUSE

The Hebrew Bible is sometimes referred to, in a sort of shorthand as "the Law and the Prophets." Someone commented that the Jewish people have the Law to show them HOW they're to live, and the Prophets to tell them when they've FAILED to do so. There's a wonderful example of this in this morning's reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. The Law commanded people to fast and humble themselves; now it was Isaiah's job to remind people that this observance had become mere sham and hypocrisy. "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."

Sure, Isaiah goes on, it looks impressive "to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes..." But God has different ideas: "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?" If we remember to do good for our neighbors, *along with* our religious observances, then "[our] light shall break forth like the dawn."

Today, in 2020, I'm amazed that those words of Isaiah's about loosing bonds of injustice and letting the oppressed go free seem to be directed right at us as we struggle to resist injustice and the oppression of our Latin and African-American sisters and brothers in today's increasingly hateful and racist climate.

This is what Jesus wants us to do while our light is set on that lamp stand, and while we're before the gaze of everyone like the city set on a hill.

Some 75 years ago in Germany, many Christians became fearful and decided that, well, it's probably for the best for us to keep a low profile and protect our light from being extinguished by the storms going on around us. Fear immobilizes us.

As followers of Jesus, we've got a special call, and it's the call we heard earlier in this same chapter from Matthew's Gospel, the "Beatitudes." It's the call to live lives of detachment from material wealth, to live lives of meekness, mercy and peace. It's the call to be ready for persecution and rejection for Jesus' sake and because we were willing to speak out against injustice and racism and hatred. It's the call to be ready not to give blows but to accept them as we strive to become beacons of love and hope for all.

Preachers and politicians from John Winthrop (the Puritan preacher in his 1630 sermon), to President John F. Kennedy in 1960, to Ronald Reagan in 1984, have all made the "city on a hill" an image for our country. But that's really not our call or judgment to make. Especially in these days of shouts about "America first," we should remember that God neither favors nor despises the United States over other nations, and there's no special divine destiny that the United States has.

We can hope and pray that our nation will strive to be a beacon of love and hope for all the world, but we'll always be disappointed, because nations are always flawed. As the church, as followers of Jesus, we're called not to try and shape "the nation" in this image, but to let Jesus Christ shape us in this image. So that when people do look at us, they'll see only the one we follow --- Jesus --- and give glory to God.

AMEN.