

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Isaiah 58:1-9a[9b-12]
Psalm 112:1-9[10]
I Corinthians 2:1-12[13-16]
Matthew 5:13-20
02/05/2023

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

[Jesus said:] 13“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. 14“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16In 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. 17“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18For 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 all is accomplished. 19Therefore, 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. 20For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Salt and Light to the World

Good morning! It's great to have the Boy Scouts here this week. I never had the right stuff to be a Boy Scout, but my grandfather did. He helped out when my dad was young, aiding in the many ways that parents do in groups like that. And as I was preparing for the sermon this week I was thinking of some of the things that he taught me when I was young. For instance, when driving late at night, or early before the sun rose on family vacations he would point out the purple light on the horizon as we approached cities. "Look for that light if you're ever lost in the woods," he said.

Our text today reminds us of the hope that a brightly lit city could have, "*14You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid,*" Jesus says. I imagine that 2,000 years ago in the first century that a city on a hill was something that gave great encouragement to weary travelers. While for the time, travel was the fastest and easiest it had ever been, but compared to now, it was slow and extremely dangerous. I've mentioned before that with electricity, we take light for granted. Back in Jesus' time, things were dark! Main roads didn't have street lamps to guide your way, and if you WERE lucky enough to have a beast for riding, it certainly didn't have headlights. I doubt any road signs had reflective paint to help you navigate. And so Jesus calls on us to be like a city on a hill, a lamp in a house, to shine forth in the world.

We pick up our text today directly following the lesson from last week. And as I said then, the section of scripture is what has been called the

“Sermon on the Mount.” It marks the largest and longest selection of preaching and teaching from Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. It’s also his first public sermon, and as first sermons go, I wish my first one had been this good! The writer of this Gospel was writing a Gospel for a group of Christian believers around the year 85 CE that were very familiar with Jewish tradition and scripture. And so, when Jesus begins, he preaches on the top of a mountain, just like a certain religious figure named Moses who spent some time on hills too. But where Moses communed with God alone, Jesus makes God’s word available to everyone.

So, after last week's introduction with the beatitudes, we launch today into three major comparisons with salt, light, and the city. The first image, salt, can be a little strange to our ears. For one, again, we take salt for granted. But fights and wars were fought over the stuff back in the day! Salt flavored a meal, but it also did something even more important, it preserved food! Without it, everything would have spoiled very quickly without the convenience of things like refrigerators. “But,” you may be saying, “salt doesn’t chemically change, what is Jesus talking about?” We had the same thought this past Monday at pericope study, and Norm Otto came to our rescue when he pointed out that it was likely salt from the Dead Sea region, which was full of impurities that degraded the quality and life of the salt. One scholar writes that *“Salt loses its saltiness not by some impossible chemical miracle, but by becoming so impure, so mixed with other elements that it loses its function.”*¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, my favorite Matthew commentator, puts things in a way we can better understand. *“We can perhaps catch [the text’s] force better by substituting another seasoning. ‘You are the red hot pepper of the whole earth!’ In this way we*

¹ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 113.

*are reminded that the statement refers not to status, as if it said ‘you are the world’s ethical elite,’ but to function: ‘You must add zest to the life of the whole world.’*²

The image of light is a little bit easier for us to understand, and as another scholar points out, *“the primary function of light is not to be seen, but to let things be seen as they are.”*³ It’s like any good tool designed for function. When it’s working, it disappears to the background, allowing you to do what you need to accomplish, but when missing, it becomes essential.

Oddly, the analogy of a city on a hill reminds us that at the end of the day, all analogies are just pieces grasping at a larger lesson. The city on a hill seems to make the opposite point of light, instead of shining forth for others to be able to see, the city on a hill tells us to become beacons for all those to look at. But Jesus is a crafty guy, and knows so no single sermon analogy from the Mount is the end-all-be-all of answers.

For Jesus, it’s about putting all these together, and that includes what we heard last week and what we’ll hear next. Chapters 5-7 of the Gospel of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount, are all part of a larger whole. They remind us that following Jesus isn’t something that can easily be condensed into one simply 10-15 minute lesson on a Sunday morning.

Like salt we must do two things, preserve the lessons and teachings of Jesus by making them evident to those we encounter. And as my man Hare pointed out, we do this by being the zest of life! God created this world as a place for us to flourish and find joy, so be sure you are doing that, and that you’re helping others to see that same beauty and hope too!

² Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 44.

³ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 113.

We can do this by shining a light in the world. Lighting up the good and holding back the fear of the night. One of the questions asked at bible study was what separates this from that good ol' Lutheran sin of works righteousness, the idea of working our way into God's good graces. The answer is that like light, we don't shine out of selfish desire, but simply as a function of who and what we are! We can't help but shine! And like light, we illumine not ourselves, but the work of God all around us.

Finally, the image of a city on a hill helps to hold us accountable. It's like when I'm out and about in my clerical collar. People see me, they pay attention, and it reminds me to be a faithful witness to God... especially when I'm driving! As cities on a hill, our actions are seen, whether we realize it or not, and so those actions should build up the body of Christ. Our words and actions reveal what we truly believe and hold valuable, we can't hide that truth.

At a time when Pharisees were so caught up with following the rules that they missed the larger point, Jesus reminds all of us that it is our relationships with one another that define the type of community we represent. And so, people of God, what type of community do you want to be? Amen.