

“SALT AND LIGHT”

a sermon on Isaiah 58:1-9a, I Corinthians 2:1-12, and Matthew 5:13-20

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Back in the 70's, when I was a teenager in Pensacola, Florida, my church – Trinity Presbyterian – had a well-established youth choir that went on annual summer “choir tours” all over the country. In my era it had about 60 members. We filled two large tour buses, and had a trailer full of sound and lighting equipment, props, and instruments.

The choir learned a different “musical” each year, but its tradition was that at least once in every high schooler's “era,” it would re-produce the musical from which it took its name, “Lightshine Choir.” The musical “Lightshine” is based on the image Jesus used as one of two metaphors for his followers in today's reading, and for many, many years I considered this text my absolute favorite passage of the whole Bible.

Go out into the world, and be salt – give everything you touch, everything you encounter “flavor” . . . to *God*. And make it *glow* with warmth and goodness in God's sight. That's what those words are saying. It is so simple and pure. *Be salt and light*.

As a teenager, I found the words exceedingly motivating. How wonderful that God “gifts” us with talents of one sort or another that we can use to build others up – exactly what the Lightshine Choir attempted to do . . . albeit on a tour that invariably took us to some destination like our nation's capital, or Disney World, or the Rocky Mountains. But along the way, we brought our presentations and our hopeful, uplifting message to churches, and nursing homes, and public squares. We were “ambassadors” for Christ in an era that was pretty tumultuous in some ways.

Interestingly, I don't believe I have ever, until now, *preached* on this passage. Honestly, I think I've been a bit afraid to tackle it . . . the way I do, now, with the tools of working minister, not to mention many more years of life experience – of witnessing the pains of life, the ugly realities of conflict, and turmoil, and dissention, and everything that throws simple optimism about the future into question and doubt.

Paul's words for the morning are intriguing on that count. He says, it seems to me, nearly the same thing – admitting to the Corinthians that he *started* his proclamation to them with simple things: “nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” But then goes on to say that “among the mature, we do speak wisdom . . .” I think that's just a truth about life and faith in general. It's *ok*, now that I'm at a different point in my life, to see things as more “complicated” than I did when I was sixteen.

And so here we are, this morning, looking at Jesus' words about salt and light. And the first thing I notice – now – is that the words come in a *context*.

It's kind of a shame that the lectionary breaks the sermon on the mount up into individual little parts. I certainly wouldn't encourage anyone to “analyze” just one “section” of one of *my* sermons. Sermons are written to be preached (or read) through from start to finish. Please keep that in mind the rest of the month of February as you hear one little “piece” each week.

And so recall that last week we looked at just the beginning of the sermon, which contains those sayings we call the “beatitudes.” And let me read again the two verses *just prior* to this morning's reading, along with the verse 13, which begins today's reading: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?”

Tricky business, being “salt of the earth.” It can lead to some tough situations. It can have consequences. But Jesus' point is that *doing* what is *right* . . . to the best of our limited human ability to *know* what is right . . . pleases God, gives “flavor” to the creation that God, through Jesus Christ, is redeeming.

The *next* thing I note in our reading for the morning is the *warnings* that come along with the instruction to go out and be salt and light. It's funny how we read over . . . and, frankly, just out and out *avoid* . . . those parts of the Scriptures – especially, by the way, in our liturgy, including our hymnody. I don't know if you remember, or ever had in your pews, the old maroon “Hymnbook.” It was, let's see, *three* hymnals ago – since there is now a new one (again) since the blue hymnal we use here at Sumner. The Hymnbook was the hymnal in use in the first church I served in Durham, North Carolina. It had a section of readings from the Psalms at the back, and that congregation, like many in those days, included a “responsive reading” from that section in every worship service. Only, it didn't

include *whole* psalms. It included “selected verses” of psalms, which were often quite “whitewashed,” as I used to say. Maybe “made politically correct” would be a more contemporary way to say it.

The 137th Psalm is a good example. In the responsive reading (and for that matter, in *both* of the musical settings of it in the Blue hymnal), it includes the lovely, pensive and poignant opening words, “by the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.” And then in the second stanza, “how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

Beautiful, and touching. Israel, in exile, lamenting their captivity, and recalling how it had been in days of old.

But psalm 137 goes *on*. It ends, in fact, with these words: “O daughter of Babylon, you devastator. Happy shall he be who requites you with what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” It’s really hard to say “the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God” after reading those words.

So back to Matthew. “You are the salt of the earth” is just the *first* part of what Jesus says. He goes on to say, “but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? [with the Greek construction clearly meaning: it *cannot*]. It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.”

Mark and Luke both also record Jesus talking about his disciples as “salt of the earth.” Luke is the most graphic. Luke 14:34-5 says, “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

And regarding the “light,” Jesus first notes that that you don’t light a lamp and then *cover* the light. What would be the purpose in that? But he then also immediately connects “light” with following . . . and *fulfilling* . . . the law. The *warning* is: “whoever *breaks* one of the least of [God’s] commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. . .”

Now on the one hand, note that he *doesn’t* say “will not *enter* the kingdom of heaven.” That’s a bit of good news – especially given our inability to *agree* on just what God’s law *actually requires* when it comes to applying it to the social issues of our day, and to complexities that ancient people simply didn’t know, or experience.

But it also says clearly that following God's commandments is *important* to God, and will remain so until "all is fulfilled," which we Christians interpret to mean when we are all, finally and fully "restored" in God's presence and light at the end of time (or in other words, *not yet*).

And more importantly, while letting our "lights shine" may have to do with putting our "talents" and "gifts" to use in God's service, as I was taught and believed back in the days of my youth, what the text is really talking about is "living uprightly," and in the awareness that wherever we go, and whatever we do, we are disciples of Jesus Christ, in God's service.

My former Greek and Preaching professor, Bill Carl, was the keynote speaker at our presbytery's *Tapestry* event last weekend in Memphis. In his address, reflecting on where the PC(USA) and the other old mainline protestant churches of this country is, and where it is going, he told a story about his mother. She spent her last days at an assisted care facility, where of course she interacted with the other residents.

There was one woman who just sat in the corner of the room and stared at the wall. When she inquired about her she was told that she should just leave her alone. "She doesn't talk to anyone." But his mother, instead, took a chair over next to her and starting conversing.

Of course, there was no response. But day after day, she kept up the practice, talking about all sorts of topics of the day. And finally one day, it happened, the woman began to respond.

Two days later, his mother passed away.

Dr. Carl's point was both personal and communal. The future is in God's hands. What we have is the present. Our work, and our opportunities for service in this world are not done until we are received into in God's nearer presence. Or as he put it, "God is never done using us." Salt and light. That is what God calls us to be salt and light – to an often dark and tasteless world in desperate need of the good news of God's love and mercy.

To God be the glory.