

Sermon for Epiphany V, Year A

February 9, 2014

Sometimes I do a little mental exercise—“What are the essential things I must have in my life?” Not people—that would of course be Lynn and our immediate family and close friends. But what are the essential *things*? How would you answer that question? Imagine you were going to a desert island—what would you take? Some are obvious. If you were stuck on a desert island, you might want a boat or a ham radio. But beyond that what would you have to have to be happy? For the purpose of this exercise, let’s assume we have some basics like clothing and shelter, food and water.

For me, a simple answer is my glasses. I am much better with them than without them because I need them to see. Another top priority would be a Bible and prayer book. I would want something to give me hope and guidance if my life was stripped down to only a few things. As an aside, the Bible is the one personal item you can take with you to prison in Georgia. I would want a pen and paper so I could express myself in some way that I could reflect upon later. What’s remarkable to me is how little I really need.

The Gospel for today points to two examples of what the world really needs—salt and light. They are more essential than my responses, I think. They are things that I know I take for granted. If you think of life without either of those things, our lives would be dramatically different—flat, tasteless, constantly scary, and limited. Jesus used salt and light as images for how he understands the identity and mission of the people that are his followers.

Preachers have spent years reflecting on these verses and what these images mean for us, mean for the church. Some reflections have been helpful and insightful; and others are somewhat tired reflections on well worn ideas. So let me add my reflections with a prayer that they help us on where we are in our journey.

First, instead of starting with the metaphors—salt and light—I’d like to start with what we are as Christians and especially as a Christian community. What are we at our best as people of faith? At our best, people who believe in and follow Jesus are people who have hope in God’s goodness and purpose for creation; and through God’s grace, we are able to translate that hope into a life that helps to bring God’s purpose closer to fulfillment. People of faith are not God (though some of us sometimes get confused about that). We are not to make grand judgments and use what power we have to sort folks into “good” and “bad” categories and treat them accordingly. No, our purpose is to be aware of and really notice what God is doing all around us; and then point to that divine action and cooperate with it by God’s grace so that others can see it, too.

And that really is what salt and light do in our lives.

Now I am not a great chef (or even a mediocre cook) but Lynn and I do like to watch some cooking shows. Our main favorite is the reality show Top Chef. We like to watch the contestants' creativity and their response under pressure. One aspect of the show comes at the end when the different chefs come before the "judges table." One group is brought in and told what a great meal they prepared; and one person is chosen as the winner. And then another group is brought in to be criticized for what they did wrong and one person is told to "pack your knives and go."

Now during the criticism stage, a surprisingly recurrent point is that the chef did not use enough salt. That seems basic to me and by the judges' reaction, it is basic to them, too. Maybe the chef did not have enough time. Perhaps he was afraid of using too much salt and ruining the dish. Often it seems the chef is so preoccupied with the advanced techniques he is using that he forgets the fundamentals of all good cooking—bringing out the flavors in the food. And that is what salt does.

So how does that describe us as people of faith? That is a worthwhile question for each of us to take home and consider this week. Here are my thoughts about being salt:

- Salt is *not* the meal. If you tried to survive just on salt, you would get sick. Likewise our beliefs and practices and all that makes us Christians and a community of faith are not everything in life. This is a warning for those of us who might be very religious. God created a world that is to be enjoyed and for which we are to give thanks. Human beings have full and demanding lives. Those things are gifts of God and realities of existence regardless of our faith.
- Salt in the right amount helps us to fully experience and enjoy what we consume. Our community-- and the message of God's love and the grace of Christ that we convey through our love, words, and actions-- exists to help people experience and appreciate the rich flavors of all of life. Nature, work, play, love, family, politics, art and on and on are all aspects of life that we are involved in as people of faith. At our best, our presence and contribution help life have deeper meaning and fuller awareness of and gratitude toward Almighty God.

So what are the salty behaviors we do now? What saltiness do we need to add in our lives and especially in our community? To answer that question, think how we help others to experience and appreciate life more fully; and as we reflect on our saltiness, let us not forget what's really important to us as a salty people.

Light of course is another huge aspect of life. One thing I remember about light is something that a college friend who was an art major told me. He said that artists "paint light." If you think about it, that's true. Light shows what we can see, of course. But it allows us to see shadows and contrast and perspective. Light enables us to see.

How do we as a community of people help people to see? Not just our ideology, but see life and especially see it from a fully human and even divine perspective? How do we point out what is often ignored in our culture and commerce? How do we help people see the subtleties of life?

To be light, we must first have the light that comes from Christ and use his radiance to see our world differently. We must learn to use Christ's light to really see. For example-- not be so quick to jump to conclusions; and not rely on old, worn out explanations. No, take time to really see and help others to see, too. That is what we're called to do and to be in Christ. To be light through Christ's light.

I read this week that when Robert Louis Stevenson was a boy, he watched an old lamp lighter igniting lamps as he went down the street. Stevenson said to his nurse, "I am watching a man put holes in the darkness." I also read that John Ruskin watched a lamplighter light his lamps and said, "Now that is what I mean by being a Christian. You ought to be able to see where he has been by the lights that he leaves burning behind him." We gather to worship Christ's light here in this place; and we carry Christ's light with us into the world so what we may see-- and help others to see, too.

This week, let us take time reflect on how we are light to the world as individuals and as a community of faith. Where does the light we carry with us help us and others see what we may otherwise ignore? How can we be a people that are known for bearing witness to what we see by Christ's light even in the midst of the world's darkness?

Jesus said we are the salt of the earth, the light of the world—and we are! This week, let us be all that we are in Christ and by God's grace. Amen.