

Sermon preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Bailey's Crossroads, VA on February 9, 2020
5th Sunday after Epiphany; Year A (RCL): Isaiah 58:1-9a; Ps.112:1-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20
The Rev. David M. Crosby

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts,
be always acceptable, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

“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 the bushel basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house.”
(Matt 5:14-15)

Back in 1954, a five-spindle milkshake maker vendor named Ray Kroc was peddling his wares throughout the Midwest United States. Everything about him suggested he was a hustler ~ more away from his wife than at home, constantly on the road, going from one bad drive-in food experience to the next. When an large unexpected sale of eight mixers to a single restaurant compelled Kroc to journey to San Bernardino, CA, he was gob smacked by the innovative concept of McDonalds, which was owned and operated by Richard and Maurice – “Rick” and “Mac” – the McDonald brothers.

Based on Rick's ingenuity and persistence, the McDonalds redesigned the whole workings of the drive-in restaurant. They focused on offering quality food through limiting menu choices to only the most popular items of burgers, fries, and drinks. That was matched with constant assessments of assembly line styled production, enabling orders to be ready in seconds rather than minutes. The result was a consistent product which patrons continued to flock to, again and again, even for a walk-up venue in the world of drive-in businesses. A market niche that moved from loitering teens to whole families dining together ushered in the “fast-food business.”

Efforts to grow their business failed because when they expanded, the McDonald brothers lost control of many of those qualities of their business that made the San Bernardino restaurant so successful. But Ray Kroc was a visionary who saw the opportunities before them, and him. As he learned more about their operation, Ray saw a picture in Rick's office, a concept schematic, which depicted a storefront property with “golden arches.” Kroc convinced the McDonald brothers to contract with him to be their head of franchising. Now, if you haven't seen the movie, I won't ruin for you. You should see it yourself. If you don't already know the story of McDonalds and its “Founder,” you should check it out. But I posit to you now that McDonalds is one of our society's examples of “a city built on a hill.” Golden Arches. Easily seen. Instantly recognizable. Everywhere you go. Even when the restaurant is in a centuries old building, say like in Rome, it is NOT hidden. Those Golden Arches are like a light shining all over the world to invite hungry people in.

In our scripture readings today, we hear a lot about different kinds of light. Isaiah declares that when we "loose the bonds of injustice" and share our bread with the hungry, light breaks forth like the dawn. Light shines in the darkness for the upright, the psalmist sings. In the gospel according to Matthew from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, the very light of the world, calls his followers to let the light of their good work shine before others, like a lamp on a stand illuminating a house. Even St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians seems to point to light, by claiming that true spiritual maturity involves judging ourselves and others considering those "things God has revealed to us through the Spirit."

These kinds of light are not generated by a flame. Lamps and candles, as Jesus points out, can be hidden. The kind of light the readings point to is light just like a city on the hill - too

big to be hidden. And, like a city, or even those Golden Arches, you know what it is when you do see it, even if it is far off, or in an unusual place.

We are called to be this kind of light. It's a challenge, but also a huge compliment from Jesus. He IS the Light of the World, but he is telling US that we are the same thing. Now, I don't know about you, but I find this compliment from Jesus a bit daunting ... until I think about one of the properties of light, which is that it can be spread through reflection. Like the moon reflects the sun's light. Jesus IS the Light that we can see from God. We are the reflections of that light, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The other readings are also telling us how we are the light.

In Isaiah, shortly after the return of Israel from exile in Babylon, the people were troubled by ineffectiveness of their piety. They were fasting, trying to draw God's attention. The prophet points out to them what really matters to God. Now, fasting is a part of many religious traditions. People limit or refrain from an activity as a symbol that their truest life comes only from the divine. In the ancient Middle East, fasting was also a way to try to influence the divine: villagers might fast in hopes of rain, or for better economic conditions. Armies would sometimes fast before battle. Even today, many faiths have ritual fasts built into their calendars. Muslims fast during the day for the entire month of Ramadan. Many of us may abstain from something specific during Lent.

But Isaiah, on behalf of God, suggests this activity was not what God wanted for the Israelites, because they were performing rituals without acting on the responsibilities of their faith. God was calling for the people to build relationships through justice, to fight against oppression, to feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked. God reminds the Israelites, and by extension of scripture, US, that outward observance is no substitute for genuine fasting that results in measurable acts affecting people. This is where light will shine. This is where the glory of the Lord will be revealed.

St. Paul reiterates that message in his first letter to the Corinthians by his focus on "knowing nothing among you but Jesus Christ and him crucified." The people of Corinth were enamored with human philosophy and wisdom, but Paul condemns those as "doomed to perish." He was humble before the Corinthians so that he could preach what Jesus did, the power of relationship to give us God's wisdom. For Paul, our light is on the hill of Golgotha, the cross serving as the lamp stand to hold us up higher so our light will not be hidden.

In the passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages his followers to be both salt and light. Salt is like light in that it is necessary for human life - we cannot exist without both. Both have many purposes: salt is a flavoring, and a preservative. It was an example of purity, and used in sacrifices. Light enables us to see, gives things colors, helps plants grow, provides energy, among other uses which are still being discovered. The Romans had a saying that "there is nothing more useful than sun (light) and salt." Using these two metaphors together, Jesus tells us WE are indispensable. So, in addition to the huge compliment of saying we are like him, he says we are necessary. We add color and flavor to life. It is WHO WE ARE as followers of Jesus. We cannot be hidden.

So how can we be salt and light in our world? Isaiah's words give us the specifics today. We build relationships by overcoming the darkness of separation. We work for justice by upholding the dignity of all people, flavoring our society with calls for equity. We clothe the naked, feed the poor, shelter the homeless. All these actions provide light to the dark areas of our world. We must see the darkness to bring the light there; we cannot dismiss it or look away.

Christians do not always get the best press these days, but we can never go wrong by doing what God commands.

But we also collectively and individually must remember to "not lose our flavor." The Greek verb that means "to lose flavor" also is translated to be foolish, to become insipid or tasteless, to cause to become nonsense. This is also included in Jesus' caution. Salt does not actually lose its saltiness, but it can be misused and render something useless. That's another thing to think about!

All our works, whatever we do, however we live, should be about reflecting the light of Jesus. Everything should be about giving praise to God. This is what Jesus wants. This is fulfilling the Law. Jesus challenges us to be the very best we can be, as salt and light. He tells us we should be teaching others to be salt and light. This is righteousness in God's eyes. This is Justice.

Our works, with God's help, should be as prevalent as the McDonalds franchise, and as recognizable as the Golden Arches around the world. Can you imagine that? Let's try.

AMEN.