

Matthew 5:13-20

Groundhog Day was this past week, and in case you missed it, we are in for six more weeks of winter... that should be no surprise to any of us. I read how Groundhog Day, at least loosely, has a connection to Christianity. To follow the Jewish law set forth in Leviticus 12, the infant Jesus was taken to the temple to be purified 40 days after his birth. Forty days prior to Feb. 2 is... Christmas, the day we celebrate Jesus' birth. In seminary we had a worship service to commemorate Feb. 2, not to celebrate Groundhog Day, but to celebrate the light Jesus brought into the world. We celebrated Candlemas where candles blessed during the worship service were passed out to the participants to use in their homes the coming year. This custom also has ties to the Lord's presentation at the Temple when Simeon the prophet declared Jesus to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32).

In today's gospel reading from Matthew Jesus gives us direction to be light to the earth. We are to shine brightly in the darkness. Remember the children's song: "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine let it shine. Hide it under a bushel, NO! I'm gonna let it shine. Hide it under a bushel, NO! I'm gonna let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine."

Did we mean what we sang? Jesus tells us to be light to the world, to let his light shine. I believe at times, if not at all times, we, at least I, hide the light of Jesus under the bushel of whatever has gotten us down that day. Maybe we've got too much on our mind... the dog (or cat) is sick, the sink is clogged up, and there's a foot of snow in the driveway. There's nothing in the refrigerator for supper and you have a pot-luck at book club tomorrow, and there's a foot of snow in the driveway. You want to go visit your children, you need gas in your car, and there's a foot of snow in the driveway! That darn groundhog! Do you see where I'm going? No, not that we have too much snow, but that the groundhog gets the blame, he's become the scapegoat, something we can direct our anger towards.

There's nothing wrong with being angry; anger is an emotion we all experience. It's what we do when we're angry that makes a difference. If we strike out at another person because of the anger, we have sinned. If we beat our pillow or a punching bag, we have found a healthy way to release our anger. Another way to diffuse the anger is to find something to laugh at... not another person's folly, but a funny movie, a joke book, or a novel with an amusing character. When we diffuse our anger rather than living it out we begin to shine the light of Jesus into the world. When we can learn to deal with stressful situations in a positive way we begin to shine the light of Jesus in the world. When we can learn not to allow another person's words, actions, or choices affect us in a negative way, we can become the light of Jesus to the world.

I have a clergy friend named Sharon who goes into all situations with a positive attitude because she believes that you have the choice to determine the outcome. One time she and I were required to attend an all day event that began at an early morning hour in a location that was a two and a half hour drive from where we were located. Being that it was a church camp, I got the bright idea that even though it was closed for the season we should check to see if we could rent a cabin overnight rather than making the drive hours before sunrise. The camp had no problem with that and said they'd have a cabin prepared for us.

Unfortunately, clergy lives being what they are, we had a late start the day before and when we arrived at the camp we found the office had closed. They didn't leave us a note with the location of our cabin, so we drove around and tried the door of each cabin we saw. They were

all locked. Not knowing what else to do, we tried the door of the recreation building. It was unlocked, and we found couches and bathrooms there so we decided to spend the night in that building. We could have been angry for not being able to get an early enough start to find someone at the office, we could have decided that they were being inconsiderate for not staying to meet us, or even to leave a note and a key somewhere we could find it. Instead we decided, mostly because Sharon decided, that it was going to be an adventure, and we didn't have to sleep in the car! Sharon was being the light of Jesus in our world.

Jesus tells us we are not only to be light, we are also to be salt. When I think of a salty person, I think of someone who has a bit of an edge to them, someone to avoid. This isn't what Jesus means at all. He says salt is a seasoning, something used to bring out the best flavor in a food. That means my friend Sharon was being salt as well as light because she decided we were going to make the best of the situation and have fun instead of being angry and grumpy and ruining the entire trip. Allowing yourself to see the best in a bad situation helps to keep the stress level down, keeps you from becoming angry, and gives you and the people around you hope.

Another purpose for salt, even though Jesus didn't mention it, is to preserve food. What comes to mind is a picture I saw in an elementary school textbook of an Eskimo in Alaska standing by a clothesline strung with fish that had been salted to provide food when the fishing wasn't good. What is it about our faith that needs to be preserved? God is love, Jesus came to show us how to live out God's love. We are forgiven because of Jesus; because of this we are to forgive. Jesus overcame death so we can spend eternity with God. Those are just a few of the basics of our faith that we are to preserve.

What's different from preserving food and preserving our faith is that food is preserved to be consumed. Once it is eaten it is gone. We preserve our faith so that it will never be totally consumed. We preserve our faith so that we can be salt and light to the weary world.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world" — My colleague the Rev. Eric Park says "not because of our moral superiority (of which we have none to offer), but because we cannot prevent ourselves from flavoring and illuminating our various environments through our shared commitment to the often-countercultural priorities of God." We are called to care for people even when it's not what most people would do... There is a plaque posted on the wall of St. Theresa of Avilla's children's home that reads: "People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies. Succeed anyway. If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you. Be honest and frank anyway. What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight. Build anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow. Do good anyway. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough. Give the best you've got anyway." These are a few countercultural ways of being salt and light to the world.

I challenge you to find ways of being salt and light to the world in the upcoming week. All glory be to God.