

Sermon , February 5, 2023

Matthew 5:13-20

***“You Are the Light of the World”***

In New Testament Greek the word we translate as ‘church’ is ‘ekklesia’. Originally it was used in a political context and its purpose was to call people to assemble. In Christian usage it, again, refers to a gathered people - gathered in unity as the Body of Christ. Together we are called to worship, to pray, and to hear the proclaimed Word of God. We are also gathered as a family of faith, the “beloved community”, to be with and support one another.

But we are also a people who are called together so that we may be prepared to be sent. Together we hopefully hear the words of Jesus, to take them into our individual and collective hearts, and to bear witness to them in the words we speak and the things we do. Our Christian responsibility does not end at the church door but recognizes all that lies beyond the doors as our mission field. This is expressed by Jesus when he says in the Sermon on the Mount, “You are the salt of the earth”, and “You are the light of the world”.

In the original Greek text , when Jesus says, “you are the salt of the earth” the word ‘you’ is plural. He is not speaking in individualistic terms, but to all of us together, the gathered community. This does not mean we are absolved of individual responsibility, but, rather, when we speak and act, we do so on behalf of the Body of Christ. For this reason, it is so important that we understand what it means to represent Christ in the world.

To understand what Jesus meant by ‘salt of the earth’ we must set aside the popular use of the phrase. When we say a person is the ‘salt of the earth’ we usually mean that this is a very fine person, a person who generally adheres to an honorable sense of ethics and morality. Now, of course, Jesus wants us to lead such lives. As he says in the Beatitudes “ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...”. But Jesus’ meaning has more to do with the fact that salt is a necessary component for life. Totally deprived of salt our bodies would die. And, so, what we must bring to the world gives life, referring to more than mere biological existence, but lives that are spiritually enriched and of value to the rest of the world.

As ‘salt of the earth’ we give of ourselves to the world, for the sake of the life of that world.

As I mentioned last week, in the Bible, the word ‘righteousness’ is often synonymous with the word ‘justice’. And, so, as the ‘salt of the earth’ we are called to be advocates for justice,

especially for the poor, the hungry, the marginalized and victims of discrimination. This is really vital in terms of creating and maintaining peace in the world. As Harry Truman once said, "Experience has shown how deeply the seeds of war are planted by economic rivalry and by social injustice".

Perhaps we can also say that as 'salt of the earth' we bring a transformative flavor into the world through Christian emphasis on compassion, mercy, and forgiveness, as well as the energies of faith, hope, and love. Transformational energies in a world often devoid of such, if not, in fact, hostile towards them.

Jesus goes on to say, "You are the light of the world". In the Gospel of John Jesus refers to himself as the light of the world, and, so, it may be more accurate to say that we are a reflection of his light. When we are faithful to him in the ways that we act in the world, particularly when we embody love at the core of who we are and what we do, his light shines in and through us.

A primary function of light is to dispel darkness, and in the context of the history of the world we can see hatefulness, prejudice, violence, as well as greed and the lustful grasping after power as darkness in the world. By reflecting his light, we reveal the true nature of such darkness and call the world to a different way of being! He goes on to point out that we cannot hide the light beneath a bushel basket. When we do so all that is darkness in the world wins, and the world loses out in the end. Again, we are called to reflect the light of Jesus through acts of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness, acts that arise out of hope, faith, and love.

Another very important function of light is that it produces photosynthesis in plants and some other organisms, and the primary byproduct of photosynthesis is the creation of oxygen without which we could not survive. It also helps in the production of Vitamin D in our bodies, another important component in our life and wellbeing. In other words, light is life giving. Likewise, as the light of the world Jesus brings New Life, and, as we are the reflection of that light, when we are faithful to his call, we too can bring New Life into the world.

(The following Prayer was not written by me, it is, in fact, a prayer that Eleanor Roosevelt ended each day with. I find it to be very meaningful and inspiring.)

The Lord be with you!

**Let us pray:** “Our Father, who has set a restlessness in our hearts and made us all seekers after that which we can never fully find, forbid us to be satisfied with what we make of life. Draw us from base content and set our eyes on far off goals. Keep us at tasks too hard for us that we may be driven to (you) for strength. Deliver us from fretfulness and self-pitying; make us sure of the good we cannot see and of the hidden good in the world. Open our eyes to simple beauty all around us and our hearts to the loveliness (people) hide from us because we do not try to understand them. Save us from ourselves and show us a vision of a world made new. Amen.”