5th Sunday of Epiphany- Salt and Light Pastor Leanne Darlington

February 16, 2020

Isaiah 58:1-9a(9b-12), Matthew 5:13-20

There is a story about a pastor from a largely affluent and prosperous congregation somewhere in American suburbia, although the same story could take place in Canada I would expect. The pastor and some of the members of the congregation wanted to know what it was like to live in poverty, what it was like to suffer from humiliation and hunger, so they spent a night on the street with a group of homeless folks. It was a dark, wet, and frosty night, and the group found themselves wandering the streets looking for any kind of shelter they could find to get out of the weather. They came upon a church that was open with the lights on, it was Holy Week and the church was participating in a Saturday night Vigil. The group became excited and looked forward to an opportunity to rest, warm-up, and pray. The pastor was the first in line to step into the warmth of the church but was suddenly stopped by a security guard. He was a friendly fellow but explained that could not let them into the warmth and light of the church. He stated that he was hired to stop homeless folks from entering the church. At any other time, the pastor and the congregation members would have been gladly allowed to enter the church without so much as a glance, but because they were wet, disheveled and accompanied by the homeless, they were deemed unworthy. The group left the church feeling dejected and humiliated, they were beloved children of God, yet were not allowed into the church that worshipped that same God.

Our readings today speak much about being the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. Have you ever wondered about the properties of salt and light? Now I am sure this seems like a strange question to ask, I am sure it does not come up in conversation often; salt and light are available most anywhere; salt on dining room tables and in kitchen cupboards; lamps and light switches are found in almost any room. But just because they are ordinary, that does not make them any less important. Salt was a precious commodity in ancient times, yes it was used as flavouring, but it was also used as a preservative, in sacrifices and as payment for employment. The word “salary” originates from the Latin term for payment to a soldier so they could purchase their allotted amount of salt.

What are some other modern-day uses for salt? (Wait for answers)

Salt does enhance the flavour of food, (it can make good scalloped potatoes into great scalloped potatoes)! It heals, it cleanses, it protects us from sliding off the road, it soothes sore muscles, it fertilizes the soil, and yes it can even act as an irritant. Have you ever gotten salt in a wound? I cut myself earlier this week and I got some salt in the cut, it stung and left me feeling uncomfortable. And Jesus said: “you are the salt of the earth”.

What about light? I sometimes wonder if we do not take light for granted. If it is dark when we enter a room, we simply turn on a lamp or open the curtains to let the sunshine in. We shield our eyes with sunglasses when the sun is too bright on a sunny summer’s day. Have you ever been driving on a dark and rainy night, alone in the country? You make a wrong turn and suddenly you are surrounded by nothing but darkness; a small amount of panic sets in and your eyes strain for any amount of light in the distance. When that light appears, your heart stops racing and instantly you feel safe and secure, or what about a ship sailing in the sea on a foggy night, looking for that light from that lone lighthouse to guide it safely to shore. Light is important! And Jesus said: “you are the light of the world”.

The disciples in our gospel reading this morning were called to be salt and light, now know that this is not a literal calling of Jesus, but it is how Jesus wanted the disciples to identify themselves. The disciples received profound knowledge in the teachings of the Beatitudes (our theme last week), but now it was time for their knowledge to be turned into action. It is not enough to simply know about God, it is living out God’s call. It is knowledge without action that leads to oppression, injustice, and racism. And being salt and light in the world is not done to simply advance one’s social status or standing. It is not about competition of who is right and who is wrong. It is not works-oriented, but many folks read that into this passage, especially when Jesus talks about fulfilling the law and seeing good works.

Being salt and light in the world is simply what we are called to do in the world by the grace and mercy of Jesus the Christ who was crucified, died and was buried, but rose again 3 days later. Being salt and light is not about us, it is about God working through us, let me say that again, it is about God working through us to feed the hungry, to offer warmth to those who are cold, wet, and lonely. Being salt and light is opening our doors to the homeless, not shutting them. Being salt and light is offering hope to the hopeless through the light and unconditional love of God.

But, being salt and light can be uncomfortable. For many years, churches were comfortable; the pews and offering plates were filled each week, Sunday Schools were full of excited kids and youth groups were busy with events and opportunities. Churches were powerful pillars of the community where community and political decisions were made over a cup of coffee and a piece of pie after the monthly potluck dinner.

The days of the early church were much different. Christine Choakian suggests that the small groups who attended early house churches were a peculiar lot of tax collectors, homemakers, and fishermen, and in later times, former Pharisees and Greco-Romans. There was no organization, there were no goals or constitutions; according to today’s standards, the health of the early church would have been deemed anemic.[[1]](#footnote-1) Does that sound familiar? Would these have been comfortable times for the early Christians? Would there have been fear and discomfort in the unknown?

Churches today, at least many mainline churches and denominations have that same feeling of discomfort; a fear of future, a fear of the unknown. I hear lots of folks pining for the glory days of the church, pining for the days when it was easier; but is wishing to go back in time truly calling congregations to be salt and light in the world? Is it calling us to action? What do we deem to be a success in the church? Is it having folks who come and fill the pews on a Sunday morning, then go home and go about their business for the week forgetting who they belong too and who they are called to be? Or, is being salt and light not so much about the numbers and more about a deeper level of commitment to the glory of God and one another? Choakian has a wonderful quote that I wanted to share with you this morning “we tend to measure a church’s value by numbers at worship, and while it is quite likely that faithful disciples are attending a megachurch in the suburbs, it is just as likely that they are attending a tiny rural congregation that makes sure its elderly neighbours are regularly visited,”[[2]](#footnote-2) or that enough cups and reusable containers are collected to help the homeless. Our success as disciples of Christ and of the church are not dependant on society’s definition of success.

Each one of you are salt and light in the world. Notice that I did not say you **were** salt, or you **will be** light. This is not a past or future calling! Each one of you right here, right now, are salt and light in the world. Each of you are created by the grace and mercy of a loving God who calls you a beloved child of God. And while salt and light may not be the most glamorous elements in the world, they are life-giving and lifesaving. Our bodies cannot live without them! So, I say unto each of you this morning “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”.

Amen

1. Christine Choakian, “Matthew 5:13-16” in *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Volume 1,Chapters 1-13,* edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Choakian, *Matthew 5:13-16*, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)