

Salt and Light

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Sermon for February 7, 1999

Lessons for Epiphany 5 in Year A

Isaiah 58: 1-9a [9b-12]

Psalms 112:1-9 [10]

1 Corinthians 2:1-12 [13-16]

Matthew 5:13-20

Salt. Where would Onondaga County be without it? Not only because we use so much of it in order to keep things moving during our long winters, but also because it was the salt industry that made Syracuse the Salt City.

Come to think of it, where would anyone be without salt? Seems that it's pretty important, and that's why it was such a big industry here.

Not only is it useful as a flavoring, but salt is necessary for sustaining life. Your body needs a certain amount of it to keep its electrolytic balance. It's also important as a preservative because it acts as a drying agent. All three of these attributes made salt a very important commodity in the ancient world. So important that a person's payment in salt is the basis for our word salary.

In the Gospel reading for this morning Jesus talks about salt and light. Not only that, but he talks about them in totally ridiculous terms. No - not the metaphor of you and I are the salt of the earth and the light of the world - what's ridiculous are the statements he makes about actual sodium chloride and actual photons. And the funny thing is that we don't realize how ridiculous

these statements are until we think about them carefully or do a little research. I know that was the case with me.

We are the salt of the earth. But that if the salt loses its flavor or saltiness, it's good for not a whole lot more than being thrown on the ground and being trampled underfoot.

Can salt lose its flavor? As I read the lesson, this question leapt out at me. Can salt possibly go bad? I know it's not radioactive, so it doesn't have a half-life, but does it slowly rot, decay, and combine with other things until it's no longer salt - and worthless? I'm a teacher in "real life," so I made a quick call to one of the chemistry teachers to find out.

Guess what - it doesn't, it can't. The bonds between sodium and chlorine are some of the strongest there are, and you have to put a whole lot of work into making salt losing its saltiness. So even though the people Jesus was speaking to may not have realized or understood it in modern chemical terms, they knew perhaps better than most of us that the idea of salt losing its saltiness was patently ridiculous.

We are the light of the world. And does anyone in the right mind turn on a light and

then hide it? Well, OK, I can think of two examples. One is the kid who was supposed to be in bed asleep hours ago, but is still awake, reading with the flashlight under the covers so that her parents won't know that she's still awake. The other is my daughter in the back of the car on a long trip. She knows that if she wants to read or draw while we're driving at night, she has to keep the light contained so it doesn't bother the driver. This often means hiding her light under a blanket.

But this isn't what Jesus is talking about. He's not talking about lighting a lamp for yourself and hiding its light from others whom it might disturb. He's talking about lighting a lamp, turning on a light, and then immediately covering it from even yourself or so that no one else can use it. Now that's ridiculous.

Salt and light. They're two pretty important things. Salt to flavor, sustain, and preserve. Light to guide and help us see things clearly. And even a small amount of either can make a big difference. Jesus says that we are those to the world.

We are the salt of the earth. Each of us, each of the small number people here can add the flavor of God's love to the world. Each of us can be part of God's sustenance of the world. Each of us can be part of God's preservation of the world. But if we don't act as God's salt, then what's the point of calling ourselves Christians?

Now mind you, there's such a thing as too salty. Too much salt makes food unpalatable. Too much salt makes you sick. If you feel intimidated by what being the salt of the earth entails, or are worried about coming off as one of those "pushy Christians,"

remember that often a little salt is just enough to do the job. I'm always amazed at how little salt it takes to start breaking up the ice in my driveway.

We are the light of the world. The light of God that we've received is not for us only, to be hidden from everyone else, but should be reflected and shared - no matter how weakly - with the world. The old song goes, "Hide it under a bushel, no. I'm gonna let it shine."

Once again, we may be intimidated by the idea of being the light of the world, or worried about being pushy, but remember that we don't have to be a searchlight in another person's face (although I hear that's pretty much what worked for St Paul). Often a little light is just what is needed, and all that is needed. It's not so much about trying to make a huge beacon as it is about not hiding the little light that God may want you to be at the moment. A light that gives someone else just what they need to see something more clearly without overwhelming them.

Flavoring and lighting the world with your faith and knowledge of God's love through Jesus doesn't have to be a big thing. It doesn't have to be a pushy thing. It doesn't have to involve awkwardly sticking religious statements into totally unrelated conversations. I'm not talking about having the cashier at Wendy's tell you that your order came to \$3.16, and then quoting back "God so loved the world" at her. What I'm talking about is when someone asks you a question that does involve your faith, when you find yourself in a conversation where what you believe as a Christian does make a difference, that you not be afraid to share that.

Don't feel that you have to give a major theological treatise, simply answer the question at hand in your own words. Be the pinch of salt or the one little candle that they need at the moment, and perhaps they'll come back for more salt and another candle. And then maybe they'll end up being salt and light for someone else.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. This is good news. Jesus

has entrusted to you the task of being salt and light. You can do it.

Let your light so shine before people that that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven.

Amen.