

February 5 2017

Scripture Lesson

Psalms 112:1-10

Isaiah 58:6-8

Sermon *Light and Salt*

The gospel text for this week deals primarily with criteria for discipleship. In Matthew, these criteria follow on the heels of Jesus' more impersonal list of "beatitudes," but in today's reading we hear Jesus getting personal.

"You are the salt."

"You are the light."

Notice, Jesus did not say, "You ought to be like light to the world;" rather, he said, "You **are** the light of the world."

Matthew 5:13-20

'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Isn't it interesting that when Jesus spoke of us, seizing upon some metaphor to characterize who we are, he didn't say, "You are a great army marching into the world." He didn't say, "You are a loudspeaker put up in the marketplace to shout my message to everybody."

Rather, Jesus said that we are "salt," and we are "light." Small, fragile, and yet both of these substances go a long way. They can make all the difference.

If you have ever been in a room with but one candle you will have noticed just how much light that one small flame gives out. Its rays stream out throughout the room. We can see the faces of one another. The whole room seems warmer, just by

the light of one candle. What a difference just one candle makes, or one flashlight in a deep cave or mine, or one set of car headlights in the west Texas desert.

While pointedly personal, both of these images of light and salt are also corporate in nature. Considerable recent research in the salt image suggests some interesting interpretations that may be helpful. By way of review, salt was far more than a mere flavor enhancer. Salt was a prime means of preserving food. Meat and fish and all brine-covered foods (like olives) depended upon salt to keep them fresh and palatable. Without salt-preserved foods, the days between harvests would have been very lean.

But surprisingly, scholars are now suggesting that what sounds like an invective against savorless salt in verse 13 may actually reflect still another use for salt. Early agricultural practices included sowing salt into the earth to restore chemical nutrients, increasing the soil's fertility. The salt "trampled under foot" may be a reference to this kind of use for this critical substance.

In all these cases, salt is portrayed as an element that must be scattered over or spread about in order to be effective. Salt stored up by itself was not useful to preserve, fertilize or give flavor. Salt must be sprinkled around. As a metaphor of discipleship, "salt" suggests that Jesus' followers are also to be out and scattered about. To be "salt" is not a static identity; it is our evangelical mission into the world. If the fertilization reference is taken seriously, even salt trampled under foot gives new life to the earth as it is ground into the soil.

In the middle of the New Mexico desert, astronomers fume about the "light pollution" from all the sprawling cities that are gradually snaking out across the land. Every time I have crossed New Mexico at night the lights of Albuquerque have thrilled me. They are a welcome sight for the weary traveler, but an unwelcome sight for the stargazers. Even on the darkest moonless night, the stars that used to gleam and twinkle so brilliantly look faded and dim. We who dwell in the middle of cities and suburbs rarely glance heavenward at night anymore – at least not to see stars. The lights that now illumine our nights as brightly as our days read "McDonald's," "Holiday Inn," "Conoco" and "Twenty-Four Hour Service."

In the glare of all these high-powered night lights, it is hard to remember just how dark and frightening the hours between sunset and sunrise used to be for our ancestors. Light, whether natural or artificial was a precious commodity.

Perhaps the only place where people still tune the rhythms of their lives to the lights in the sky are those who dwell above the Arctic Circle. Despite the modern convenience of the light switch, there is no ignoring the fact that the daylight hours all but disappear for several months. From mid-November until mid-January, the sun does not rise above the horizon. In fact, from August until mid-November, residents can count on losing 10 to 15 minutes of light each day until the depths of the winter solstice. At best, those high above the Arctic Circle may look forward to

two or three hours of indirect or half-light around midday for nearly two months.

Yet while the stars that light the sky during this period may shine for long periods, they are not enough to dispel the gloom that pervades the streets and can easily poison the soul. Those of us who curse “light pollution” for dimming our stars are disgusted, not for losing light, but for losing a beautiful, heavenly starscape to ponder. Stars are both too distant and too overwhelming to offer us any real nighttime comfort or vision.

During our own periods of darkness and shadows we really don’t need more stars – we need more common lights or lamps to light our everyday paths on this earth. Whether in literature, academe, Hollywood, or the firmament, stars inspire us, they dazzle us, they entice us to dream. But a star won’t keep you from stubbing your toe on a stone as you wander down a dark and lonely road.

In Matthew’s text this week, Jesus urges us to serve as lamps for one another, not stars that only dazzle and inspire. Jesus calls us to be lights for the world, not exploding supernovas. Alas, there seem to be a lot more Christians who want to be stars than are willing to be lamps.

Jesus encountered the “star syndrome” among his own disciples. In Matthew” 20, verse 20, the sons of Zebedee and their equally ambitious mother petition Jesus, begging him to “save them seats” in heaven. James and John don’t want just any old place – they specifically ask Jesus for the “star” seats, those immediately at his right and left hands. James and John are looking for stellar statues, a place where they may shine down on others.

Jesus tried to teach these two star-seekers that their request was wrongheaded for two reasons. First, Jesus claims that heaven’s seating order is his Father’s domain – not his. More importantly, Jesus patiently reminds James and John that the way they may emulate him and be “first” in the kingdom is through selfless service to others. Doing for others, not looking out for oneself, is the only way to turn up the candlepower on our individual lights.

As James and John demonstrate, there are lots of people wishing they were “stars.” But what Jesus preaches is the need for more “lamp-Christians.” Lamp-Christians are those who willingly burn in service – as both disciples and mentors for others.

Hebrews 10:24-25 defines the glowing value of being a lamp Christian – It reads, “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, ...”

... “Modeling” or “mentoring” is a popular concept today. But what does it mean for you and me to be model/mentor Christians? Although mentors or teachers may often appear to be elevated to “upfront” positions, genuine mentors do not try to be “stars.” The role of a Christian mentor is that of a lamp, helping

illuminate the pathway that lies directly at his or her student's feet, offering guidance and service in indirect, even pedestrian ways.

As a child, didn't you like to sing "This little light of mine ... I'm going to make it shine...?" The only problem with that song is that it focuses exclusively on the single beam of light emitted by our small singular lights. Jesus wanted us to think corporately about the illuminating power he generates in each of us. The "city built on a hill" is not noticed because one lone light flickers in a window. It is the combined wattage of an array of lights, each burning in its own place, but for a common purpose, that sets the city ablaze in the midst of a dark and dreary night. George Bush, our former President, may have said more than he realized when he touted the "thousand points of lights" theme.

There are no lamps that cannot throw some light on some darkened portion of a fellow-traveler's pathway. Take confidence in the potential power of your lamp, for its light source is truly unquenchable. The psalmist reminds us that the eternal flame of scripture is always available to us for additional fuel: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

Don't make the mistake of thinking that you are not somehow "mentor-material." Indeed, we need only to let our lights shine, that others may see and find the way, the truth, and the life.

John Ruskin lived in the days when English villages were lighted by lamps along the streets. One evening, he watched with a friend as a lamplighter moved slowly on a distant hill, lighting the lamps along the street. Ruskin said, "There is what I mean by being a real Christian. You can trace his course by the lights that he leaves burning."

Fellow Christians, you become that salt and light when you touch other people with the love of God. You become that substance which savored a world which for another had become tasteless and dull.

You became that light shining in the darkness. It is our job to keep the lights burning.