

“Just Enough to Get the Job Done”

Isaiah 58:1-12
Matthew 5:13-16

Ash Wednesday

February 17, 2010

“You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world.”
(Matt. 5:13 & 14)

Our journey toward Easter can be a repetition of familiar traditions or, it can be a season of renewal and remembrance – who we are and what we are to be. He reminds us that we are salt and we are light.

A young pastor once asked the members of his first congregation why they came to church. *“What is it that you expect from my sermons?”* he asked. The response he heard most often was, *“I come to church to hear what I’m doing wrong and to be told what I need to do to get right.”*

I’ve never really stopped and thought about it, but if I analyze it I guess most of us preachers are trying to get you to do something. The language of *“You ought ... you must ... you should ...,”* permeates many a preacher’s sermons – we seem accustomed to proclaiming the Gospel in the imperative mood.

But the imperative mood seldom affects human nature ... at least not for very long. Just think about how many times, as a child, you were told to make your bed or floss your teeth before the imperative of a parental swat drove the imp in you to make a habit of it. As we stand on the threshold of Lent Christian ministers of every stripe are sorely tempted (and parishioners steel themselves) for one more dose of the imperative voice.

But not so tonight. Tonight we take Jesus’ lead and avoid the imperative altogether. For set between the *Beatitudes* and the programmatic portion of the Sermon on the Mount - in which Jesus spells out the qualitative nature of the new life he brings - the Master metaphorically describes of his circle of friends this way:

“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” Simon Peter might have been swatting a fly as Jesus said it. Nathaniel might have been nudging Mary Magdalene who very likely broke out in a toothless grin, *“Us? Salt? Light? What?”*

“Yes,” Jesus says, “You are salt for the entire earth. You are light for the whole world.”

The Greek of the New Testament, unlike our English, needs no pronoun before a conjugated verb, unless it is used for emphasis. Matthew does just that as he inserts the definitive article here in order to underscore the **you**. It’s not just, “*You are the salt of the earth .. the light of the world,*” it’s “**You are salt ... You are light.**” The imperative is gone. The gospel is now personal.

Jesus isn’t saying to them that they *should* be salt, or that they *ought* to be light. He is not trying to coax them into becoming something or doing something. He is saying that they already are these things: **it’s the gospel in the indicative mood**. Jesus is making a statement, an assertion.

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Salt. Tiny crystals of sodium chloride. Not significant in themselves (nobody eats just salt). Salt’s an ingredient that enables things to happen. **It’s utterly essential.** Try eating your grits without salt! Or a hard boiled egg! And those of you on salt free diets know very well what happens to the taste of food without salt.

You disciples - so small/so seemingly insignificant - yet sprinkle enough of you around in your neighborhood or your workplace or your school or your community organizations ... why there’s no telling what you’ll stir up; there’s no telling what flavors you’ll enhance.

You disciples - without you the whole earth would loose its zest.
Without you ...

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| <p>It doesn’t seem that ago to me ... when it seamed like everyone I knew was Christian – the only thing that differentiated us was our denomination. And I don’t remember us Christians, in the town I grew up in, arguing too much either. Of course I was only a kid. And what do kids know? When I was a kid the only thing odd about the Catholic kids was that thing about eating fish on Fridays. Fifty years ago congregations were bursting at the seams (though not always for religious reasons) – in many communities church attendance was a social and economic imperative. And when worship let out the Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists seemingly raced each other to be first in line at the Edison Cafeteria.</p> |
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Is it possible there ever was such a time - when you couldn't get gas or a gallon of milk on a Sunday morning? When businesses were closed all day on Sundays?

Times have changed. Our culture has changed. Buddhists and Bahia's and Muslims are sprinkled in with Methodists and Lutherans and Catholics all across our religious landscape. We share our neighborhoods with Unitarians and Jews and Agnostics. English isn't the only language we hear. And Caucasian isn't the only box the majority of Americans will check in next month's nationwide census. A multitude of activities and shopping are among any given Sunday's choices in almost every American community. The Christianity I grew up with has gone the way of the Edsel (whatever that was).

Yet being a Christian by default was never Jesus' intention.

If we are to be followers of Christ we are to do body and soul. Jesus tells us we are salt ... we are light. If we lose that saltiness or hide that light under a basket, we essentially lose our identity as members of the Body of Christ. In fact if we cease being the *Spice of the Life* that he brings; if we fail to *Light the Way* in a world that more desperately needs both, we not only deceive ourselves, we deceive the world around us - we are not who we claim to be.

Some years ago, Josh McDowell, an evangelical Christian writer, asked a question that stands the test of time. "*If you were on trial for being a Christian,*" he asks, "*would there be enough evidence to convict you?*"

"You and I are the salt of God's transformative justice to the whole creation" writes theologian N.T.Wright. You and I bear the light and the name of Jesus Christ. And Christ calls us to be what he has made us, reconcilers: one to another - and all to God.

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Our culture seems so divided, so at odds across so many lines. We have seemingly lost our mooring. We have forgotten how to talk to one another when we don't see eye to eye. We label each other. We distrust each other. Our community is fraying. It seems as if the center cannot hold us together as a people.

And in the midst of it - on the threshold of this Lenten Season, Jesus calls us by name: Salt. Light. Good News. Reconciler. Mediator. Peacemaker. Healer. Listener. Bringer of Hope. Repairer of the Breach.

And numbers aren't ever the issue. A campus chaplain was once asked, "*How many students do you usually get into the Chapel on a Sunday morning?*" "Not that many," she replied, "*just enough to get the job done.*"

Jesus selected just enough disciples to get the job done. And there are just enough of us. Though it means we are to be salt and we are to be light. We can't just let the other guy, or the other gal do it. Disciples who don't look like disciples, churches that don't act any different than any other organization are not much help in showing anyone the way out of the dark. Jesus doesn't have much sympathy for salt that has stopped being salt – in his mind it becomes nothing more than common dust.

But you are so much more than that. You are the way Jesus is busy turning inside out the whole world, enlivening it, giving it ultimate meaning. So the little things that you do, like how you spend your time and your money, the words you speak, how you treat others, the way you use your resources and your power, the jokes you tell ... it all matters. Because you belong to Christ and the whole world is watching and judging the Christian message by the sort of people faith in Jesus is able to produce.

You are the salt of the earth, without you the whole world loses its zest. You are the only light the world has, says Jesus. Hide your light under a basket and everyone stumbles.

You are salt. You are light.
Beloved of God be what you are -- in Christ.
 Amen!

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 Fourth Presbyterian Church
 Greenville, South Carolina

A version of this sermon was delivered at First Presbyterian Church, Muskegon, MI in Lent of 1998

Resources:

- Wright, N.T. Simply Christian. New York: Harper Collins, 2006
 McDowell, Josh. Evidence That Demands A Verdict, Revised Edition. Here's Life Publishers, San Bernardino, California, 1979
 Willimon, William. Pulpit Resource. Year A. Vol. 24, No. 1., Jan.-Mar. 1996. Pp 19-22.

