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Epiphany 5A
Peace, Seattle
February 5, 2017
Matthew 5:13-20, Isaiah 58:1-12

GOING PUBLIC

Today's gospel follows right after last week's Beatitudes, where Jesus gives his growing community of followers a new way of seeing who and what is precious in God's sight. A way that turns the world's dominant paradigm on its head.

> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are they who mourn, who are meek, the merciful, the peacemakers and the persecuted. To them belongs the kingdom of God."

With these words, Jesus lifts whole categories of otherwise invisible people up from the ash heap and declares them blessed.

This week Jesus shifts his attention ever so slightly, and the third person "THEY" becomes the direct address "YOU."

> YOU ALL ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH. YOU ALL ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

You and I are now among those who sit at Jesus' feet, and so we must ask:
What does it mean for us to be salt? What does it mean for us to be light?

I once had a parishioner named ROBERT…6 foot-4…a beard Santa would envy…a voice like a megaphone…hands big as baseball mitts. Robert was substantial in every way.

A Vietnam vet who'd found faith as an adult, Robert believed in prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit and was more than happy to demonstrate it. He was a "salty" Christian.

His big bass voice had been honed into a powerful instrument during his years as a street preacher, where he'd learned to share the truth about God with anyone who was ready to take it.
A quiescent Christian Robert was not!

Now nearing 70, he'd found his way to the congregation I was serving, and accepted our invitation to join our Journey of Faith process.

At the end of that process, we hosted a gathering at our home, and during the sharing time one of the other participants disclosed an ailment that was troubling her.

As he listened, Robert felt the Spirit's call to offer prayer. Not wanting to shut down a genuine exchange, but a bit wary that Robert might be overwhelming, I stood with him as he approached her. The woman, a mother of 5 with a deep faith of her own, seemed completely comfortable with Robert, and accepted his offer. And so he placed his super-sized hands on her injured shoulder and prayed.

The next day I learned that not everyone had been as comfortable with Robert's way of being salt. But sharing his story helped them to see that though his style of being a salty Christian was a bit foreign to their way of thinking, it was legitimate as their own.

YOU ALL ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH, says Jesus. BE YOUR SAVORY BEST!

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YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD. Not "you have the potential to become light if you keep working at it," but YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

Now there are many ways of being salt and light. Not everyone is going to manifest it like Robert did. Every community, everyone must answer the call to BE SALT AND LIGHT in ways that flow naturally from WHO THEY ARE.

Robert's way was unique to him, his history, his story. Yours is unique to you, to your story. And our way, as a congregation, will be unique to who we are and the assets, talents, passions and gifts that make us who we are.

What our texts tell us this morning is that there is both an interior quality to being salt and light and an exterior or manifest quality to who we are and what we bring, and that one leads to the other.

For example, our life of faith begins at the font, where the Triune God meets us and makes us her own. That washing anchors us internally in God's grace and the promise we belong to him forever.

Yet, this is only the beginning of the journey—because the water of the font follows us wherever our lives go.

- If flows like the rain from the roof into our cisterns and raingardens, contributing to a cleaner Puget Sound.
- It mingles with the Salish Sea buoying up the rafts we make for Harbor Seal pups.

The conviction that we are precious children allows us to see that too many other precious ones are caught in the epidemic of homelessness, poverty, and violence. Convinced we can make a difference we make room for Mary's Place families; we build a Tiny House; we right letters to congress supporting for food programs, we advocate for refugees whose longing for safety and home are as deep and abiding as our own.

Being a community of LIGHT means being a VISIBLE community. The light in here—shines out there. Our life together and our embodiment of GOOD NEWS must be public. As the song says, HIDE IT UNDER A BUSHEL —NO! I'M GOING LET IT SHINE.

Words are important, but words by themselves are not enough. Conviction by itself is not enough. We're called to walk the talk. We're called to bear the fruit.

"My speech and my proclamation," writes Paul, "were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God."

This is not a new teaching Jesus is laying out for us. It is in fact what the prophets proclaimed persistently and powerfully, and our text from Isaiah is a prime example. **What's going on here?**

In Isaiah 58 the LORD, weary from having the same old conversation again and again, is addressing those who think that ritual acts of engagement like fasting and prayer—ought to be enough to get God's attention.
WHY DO WE FAST, BUT YOU DO NOT SEE? they ask God.
WHY DO WE HUMBLE YOURSELVES BUT YOU TAKE NO NOTICE?

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But God, seeing beneath the surface knows what's really going on. So the prophet replies:
LET'S GET REAL FOLKS! YOUR IDEA OF A FAST IS ALL ABOUT SELF-INTEREST. YOU GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS WITHOUT CONNECTING YOUR INNER LIFE TO YOUR OUTER ACTIONS. THAT'S NOT FASTING—THAT'S QUID PRO QUO.

IS NOT THIS THE FAST I CHOOSE:
- TO LOOSE THE CHAINS OF INJUSTICE, TO LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE
- TO SHARE YOUR BREAD WITH THE HUNGRY AND BRING THE HOMELESS POOR INTO YOUR HOME
- THEN SHALL YOUR LIGHT BREAK FORTH LIKE THE DAWN, AND YOUR HEALING SPRING UP QUICKLY.
- THEN YOU SHALL CALL AND THE LORD WILL ANSWER, YOU SHALL CRY AND GOD WILL SAY, HERE I AM.

Without that movement from interior to exterior, from personal to public, the spring dries up, the garden wilts, and hope wavers. But with it, with that juicy, savory, moist, bright exhibition of grace—light dawns, desert becomes oasis, and dryness gives way to springs of living water. That's the way it is meant to be!

History tells us that in the mid-second century a major plague devastated the Roman Empire, and that during the epidemic, between 1/4 and 1/3 of the empire's population died.[1] Sources say that as many as 5,000 people A DAY were dying in the city of Rome alone.

In his book on Christian origins, Rodney Stark asserts that these pandemics provided unforeseen opportunities for the Christian values of love and charity to shine.[2]

When those plagues hit, there was nothing within the pagan worldview that could incorporate that kind of devastation or fashion an adequate response to it. As a result, people abandoned their religious systems and the sick were unceremoniously dumped onto street to die without care.

The emerging Christian worldview, however, combined an ethic of compassionate care with a firm belief in "the life of the world to come" and this moved Christians to risk caring for victims without fear for their own futures.

They tended to those who were struck down by the plague, fellow Christians and non-Christians, too, caring for those had been rejected and cast out.

This deeply imbedded ethic of caring enabled Christian folk to survive the plague at higher rates than their fellow citizens. Their immunity increased, and their numbers grew.[3]

So remarkable was this Christian response in the face of the plague, that at least one pagan leader suggested the Christian ethic of caring should be used as a model for non-Christians—even if their belief system should not.[4]

What about the 21st century? What will historians write about the church of this time, centuries hence?
- How will the ethic of caring be manifested in our day?
- What social-ethical behavior will become such a powerful legacy that even non-believers will be compelled to use it?

[1] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: how the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western Word in a Few Centuries.* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996) p. 73.
[2] Ibid, p. 74.
[3] Ibid, p. 91f.
[4] Ibid, p. 84.

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- What will future generations say about our ministries with the homeless, with refugees, with victims of terror, with vulnerable species, lands and waters?

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

It's in our DNA. Today, and indeed every time we gather around Word, Font, and Table, we revisit that truth. And Christ meets us with encouragement and power to make it so.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, you have gifted us with everything we need to be your presence—to be salt and light in the world. Forgive us when we shy away from our calling or fail to take it to heart. Walk with us each day and guide us, so the faith we hold within ourselves will find expression in our love of neighbor. Amen.