Isaiah 58: 1-8

Psalm 112: 1-9

1 Corinthians 2: 1-12

Matthew 5: 13-20

Sermon for 2/5/2023

**SALT AND LIGHT**

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Images of a Christian life.

One thing Jesus always was was honest with his followers. He never promised them a rose garden for following him; on the contrary, he warned them to expect hardship, toil and trouble and poverty, even martyrdom.

The first twelve verses of Chapter Five of Matthew’s gospel contain the opening section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the so-called Beatitudes that Jim talked about last week: Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the merciful, and so on. The very last Beatitude is possibly the most difficult of them all, because in it Jesus says that you are blessed when men persecute you, when they revile you, when they say all manner of evil falsely about you for His sake. It’s as if he wanted them to be clear from the very beginning about one very fundamental fact: that the message they would be preaching, the Way of life they would be following and asking others to follow, is in opposition to the world, and they can expect the world to resist it with hostility and hatred.

And if you keep in mind that Jesus concludes his Beatitudes with a terrible warning, what he says immediately after acquires a real poignancy. So let’s read it together:

Matthew 5: 13-20

Salt and light. These are the two images Jesus uses to make his point. And what is his point? In effect, Jesus is telling his first followers: I am sending you on a mission to save the world, and the world will hate you for it, and resist you, and even kill you. But you are the only chance the world has. And the images he uses to represent what he is asking them to bring into the world are these two simple things: salt and light. So what I’d like us to do today is to think a little about what these two images would have represented to his followers then, and continue to represent to us today.

First, salt. It’s noteworthy that the phrase Jesus first used in his sermon on the mount two thousand years ago has passed down through the ages and into modern parlance. One of the highest compliments you can pay to someone, when you want to stress the person’s solid worth and character, is to say: People like that are the salt of the earth. What are we saying about them? That they are plain, and honest, and hard-working, and conscientious, and mindful of their responsibilities. (As an aside, you scarcely ever heard it said of lawyers, or politicians, or preachers, for that matter.)

In Jesus’ time, salt was connected with three things.

The first was purity. No doubt its glistening whiteness helped establish that connection. Salt is the pure white product of the pure sea and the pure sun. That’s why among the Jews salt was always added to the sacrifices to God.

In a heathen ancient world noted for its wantonness, its coarseness, its licensed thievery and its sexual immorality, the early Christian churches were ridiculed, marginalized and isolated because of their modesty, their reserve, their chastity, and the simplicity of their lives. St Paul battled in city after city to establish and maintain islands of purity in an ocean of depravity and gross vanity.

And if the ancient culture provided an unwelcoming and dismissive environment for the pure salt of Christianity, our modern culture is perhaps even less accommodating. You can scarcely turn on the TV, or open a book, or listen to popular music, without being assaulted by a gross coarseness of expression and attitude that is being woven ever and ever more tightly into the fabric of our daily lives. The pure salt of a Christian life, a life of moral purity and honesty and cleanness is not something that achieves victory over the world – it is something that separates itself, not from the world itself, but from the ways of the world.

In the ancient world, salt was also the commonest of preservatives, used to prevent corruption in meat. And surely Jesus was drawing upon this aspect of salt as well. We all know that there are certain people in whose company a soiled story be greeted with pleasure, and there are others to whom no one would dream of telling such a story. I was sitting with a family making funeral arrangements a few weeks ago, and one of the family members let slip the F word, and then immediately turned to me and said, “Oh, I’m sorry, Reverend.” I had to laugh to myself because that person mistook me for someone better than I am, but the point is: even if I wasn’t, the person took me to be such a person, because of my title, and was embarrassed by his own behavior. And salt to others, to be the cleansing antiseptic in whatever company we happen to find ourselves in, should he the prayer and aspiration of every Christian.

But third, the greatest and most obvious quality of salt is that it lends flavor to things. Food without salt is a sadly insipid and often even disgusting thing. Christianity is meant to be to life what salt is to food. Christianity is what brings out the goodness of life, and adds to its flavor.

This is very, very often forgotten or even resisted. Oliver Wendell Holmes, the great progressive jurist, once said: “I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.”

We all need to discover and enjoy the lost radiance of the Christian faith. In a worried world, the Christian should be the one who remains serene. In a depressed world, the Christian should be the one who remains full of the zest for life. In a world where the coarse and the depraved and the grotesque are elevated as the new models of aesthetic taste , the Christian should seek and relish true beauty where God put it in His creation.

And what about light?

When Jesus told his followers “You are the light of the world,” he was offering them the greatest possible compliment. Why? Because elsewhere, Jesus said, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9: 5) When Jesus said that Christians must be the light of the world, what did he mean?’

Well, first and foremost, of course, a lamp is meant to be seen, and to enable vision. The image Jesus uses here and has in mind is that of a lamp in a typical Palestinian house of the time. The houses were very dark, and had only a tiny window, if even that. The lamp was a little boat-shaped vessel, like Aladdin’s lamp, filled with oil with the wick floating on the oil. It wasn’t easy to rekindle a wick in those days before matches existed, so the greatest care was taken to make sure the lamp never went out. Normally it stood on a lampstand, but when people left the house or went to sleep, they’d take it down from the stand and put it under a bushel or basket for protection, and that’s what Jesus is talking about here. But when people returned or got up in the morning, they put it back on the lampstand so it could perform its proper mission, which was to give light to their world.

And in like manner, Christianity is meant to be seen, and to light up its world. There is to be nothing ostentatious about one’s Christianity, but equally nothing shy. I highly recommend memorizing a few Christian truisms, a few of the pieces of advice or instruction of Jesus, and sprinkling them into the conversation where appropriate. If you’re worried about being considered a prig or a goody two-shoes, just remember that elsewhere Jesus once said that if you are embarrassed to represent him before the world, he will be embarrassed to represent you before God. I’d far rather be considered a prig by a coarse and callous world than an embarrassment by my Lord and Savior.

And light, of course, can also serve as a guide, and this is a responsibility that a Christian must take seriously. Within her or his own family, to one’s children, that of course goes without saying. But guidance is also something Christians are called upon to provide others. Looking out over a crowd of people, Jesus once observed that they are like sheep, seeking a shepherd, and what was true then is true today, perhaps even truer than ever, what with the overwhelming and increasingly sophisticated tools available for shaping and petrifying people’s thoughts and attitudes.

It is a simple reality of human nature that people wait for someone else to be the first to take a stand, particularly if it is opposed by the majority, before they will muster the courage to follow. Where following Christ and the paths of Christ are concerned, it is a Christian responsibility to be a guiding light for others.

And that of course ties in with what Jesus tells us in v. 16: Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

There are two points of importance here. The first is this. Perhaps the principle instruction Jesus wishes to convey throughout the entire Sermon on the Mount is that the heavenly value of an action depends on the quality of the person performing it. Make the tree good, and the fruit will take care of itself, might serve as a summary of the entire sermon.

So we might rephrase v. 16 as follows: Let your light shine before others, that they may see the goodness from which your works flow. The aim and ideal of every Christian should be that others see through your works, whatever they are, to the essentially Christlike spirit from which they flow.

And that brings us immediately to the second point. The greatest temptation and therefore most terrible danger of the Christian life is self-glorification. Let your goodness shine, not that others may see what how wonderful you are and admire you and envy you and applaud you, but that they may see God’s spirit working through you.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that, in his view, the perfect sermon would be one in which the minister completely disappears, and all that lives on in memory is the message. In the same way, the perfect goodness is one in which God’s own nature shines through, and the human agent disappears.

So, salt and light. The two best images for being a Christian, being a follower of Christ. Here’s what I hope we remember from this sermon, even after everything else about it is forgotten:

Salt itself has almost no taste; no one eats a tablespoon of salt for a snack. What salt does is make the things it touches taste better. And in the same way, you never see light itself; it is by light, that you see everything else.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is we may all become as useful as salt and light, as pleasant and generous as salt and light, and as humble as salt and light, because those are the qualities Christ’s spirit seeks to instill in us, and we are his followers, and we pray in his name. Amen.