

Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time
2020

Isaiah 58.7-10; I Corinthians 2.1-5; Matthew 5.13-16

Today's gospel follows immediately upon the Beatitudes in the fifth chapter of Matthew. This gospel presents Jesus as the teacher, the rabbi. The crowds have assembled on the mountain, as have the disciples of Jesus, as he begins to teach them, making clear that he is not to abolish the law, but bring the law to its fulfillment - to its deepest and truest place in our lives. Jesus begins his teaching with these words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the reign of God."

These poor in spirit are those who await the fulfillment of ancient promises and hopes. They are the long-suffering, faithful servants and seekers who are drawn to the rabbi from Nazareth, wondering, if perhaps, this one is the promised one of God.

Jesus looks out over these crowds, and speaks directly to them: "You, poor in spirit, are the salt of the earth." Note: Jesus does not say you can be or should be...but you ARE the salt of the earth." Salt was a precious commodity. Today salt is so common, so inexpensive, that we have forgotten that from the beginning of civilization until the last century salt was one of the most precious of commodities. Salt represented wealth. Merchants stockpiled it. Nations taxed it to finance their wars. Soldiers and laborers were often paid in salt.

On one of our trips to the island of Kauai one of our relatives gifted us with a bag of Hawaiian salt. This salt is extracted from the brackish water of ponds and streams; it is an ancient and laborious and time-consuming process. And this salt is precious to the giver; there is a custom that you do not sell this salt for a price; you can only give it away.

To Jesus, these crowds of listeners were priceless, precious, and crucial to the fulfillment of God's reign and God's hope for us. So the words are spoken to us as well. YOU are the salt of the earth. Had I been in the crowd that day, I might be inclined to look around to see who Jesus was speaking to.

YOU! He says. You are the salt of the earth. You give flavor to the earth, the earth being the entire created order, and the family of nations and peoples. We have an expression when we meet some who is genuine and authentic, someone who deep down in their bones is a person of goodness and decency. We call them "salt of the earth." That's you...and me.... and us: like salt and its properties, we bring flavor to life, like salt and its remedial properties, we work to lessen human pain and restore what is right. Like salt the preservative we honor and protect who and what are precious to God.

By the way, salt is also an irritant. So be an irritant once in a while. Get irate. Call the world to the standards of the reign of God. Be the voice for the voiceless. Hold

our institutions responsible. Demand integrity from those who govern us. Given the politic of the day and the events of this week, we can easily become exhausted. So do not let your salt go flat. Do what you must to keep its flavor strong. And keep in mind that the YOU as in "YOU are the salt of the earth" is not just me but US. The collective YOU.

Subsequently YOU/WE are the light of the world. Another precious and critical commodity in Jesus' day. The lamp does not shed light under a basket. It must be in a place where it gives light to all in the house. It's not just the light in itself that is welcome and necessary; it is what the light illumines and reveals that is fundamental.

We know well from our own struggles to secure justice that faith does not allow us to sit on the sidelines. Back home from exile, the people of old were overwhelmed by what awaited them: the prophet Isaiah urges them to not abandon the hungry, the oppressed, the homeless the naked, and the afflicted. Share your bread with them, shelter them, clothe them -- do so, and then the light will rise for you in the darkness.

So, salt and light. Two simple yet compelling images. Be the salt that gives gives flavor, sometimes zesty flavor – that brings out goodness, savors life, heals, restores, preserves and protects what is precious. Be the salt that sometimes stings. And be the light, which shines and beckons, which breaks through the darkness, illumines beauty and goodness and hope and possibility.

Over the next couple of Sundays we will hear other portions of the Sermon on the Mount and hear some teachings of Jesus that both clarify and challenge what Jesus teaches in today's gospel passage. To be continued.