

Sermon for February 5, 2023

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Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112:1-9

1 Cor. 2:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

Becoming the Church of Salt and Light

Today's Gospel reading follows Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes, we call them. Jesus was preaching to a large crowd. And I'm always reminded of that Monty Python scene in his movie, "Life of Brian." The camera pans back, revealing more and more of the crowd. And as it moves back, Jesus' sermon gets fainter and fainter. Some folk at the very back of the crowd are struggling to hear.

One says, "What's he saying?"

Her husband tells her Jesus said, "Blessed are the cheesemakers."

"What's so special about cheese makers?" his wife says.

Her husband replies, "It's not meant to be taken literally; he's referring to any manufacturers of dairy products." Great puzzlement all around.

Later, Jesus speaks only to his disciples, saying: "You are the salt of the earth-oven." And maybe the disciples are puzzled, saying, "What? Did he just say, you are the salt and dung patties that make our earth-ovens work? I don't think that's a nice thing to say."

Someone else adds, "Yeah. Those salt and dung patties do wear out after a time and have to be thrown away. How is that right?"

Jesus goes on to say, “You are the light of the world.” He’s piling on metaphors. “You are a city built on a hill, a lamp stand.” And, “You’ll be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Now, these disciples were fishermen, tax collectors and various other stragglers and sinners. They’re not as dim-witted as those in the back of that crowd in the movie. But, they are in the very early stages of learning from Jesus how they are to live now that they’ve agreed to follow him. Be salt, he says. Be a catalyst for something new to happen. Be transformers. Or as we might say today, be influencers.

He goes on: be light. Not just that one dim lantern hanging in the house after dark. Be the light of the world. Let your life so shine that all the world will see your good deeds and understand how to live.

It’s a tall order for both the disciples and for us today. Be the salt of the earth. Be the light of the world. One writer speculates, “Couldn’t the almighty settle for a votive candle or a pinch of seasoning, enough goodness just to get me and mine through the day, rather than a preservative and a beacon for all of creation?” He goes on, “This little light of mine, I am having a hard time letting it shine.”

We try to discern the good news, but we might have to write, “Be salt! Be a catalyst! Be a beacon of light!” in the “not- so- good” column. Like the Jesus followers to whom Matthew was speaking in the great city of Antioch, we here at MacNeill find ourselves being called to an alternative way of life. Like Matthew’s church in Turkey, we are a minority, a marginal existence in our culture. We live more and more in a hostile context, among people of many faiths and no faiths.

Like Matthew's church our numbers are small. Some days we seem to be just keeping our heads down, hoping we won't be asked to do anything risky like settling land claims; like helping to ensure people aren't living in tents all winter; like feeding the hungry here in this city and away in famine-stricken places.

Do you find yourself, along with the disciples, wondering where Jesus gets these ideas about this alternate way of life? He tells the disciples these teachings are to be found in "The law and prophets." That is, they come from the first five books of the Scriptures, the books of Moses. There the Ten Commandments are prominent. And the prophetic books are to be found later in the Scriptures. Jesus is not abolishing or destroying the law and the prophets. Far from it! He's interpreting them for his own time. For his small group of followers the scriptures are binding on matters of justice and on all that Jesus will be teaching them. The law and the prophets will not pass away until God's purposes have been accomplished.

You will remember that the Ten Commandments given to Moses are, by Jesus' time, 613 laws. That's what the Pharisees teach the people: How to abide by 613 laws. Jesus calls that a narrow view of how they are to live. The Scribes and Pharisees interpret the Scriptures in ways that favour the societal elites, the governing group in alliance with Rome." The Pharisees pay no attention to justice, mercy and faith, the highest values of the prophets. Rather, they're firmly on the side of the Empire and their own entrenched power and wealth.

The Jesus groups must practice a way of life that challenges the status quo: one that trusts in the reign of God, already begun in Jesus' coming, his healing presence, his wise teaching. The Reign of God will transform the world. For that

to happen, the disciples are to exceed the justice and righteousness of the Pharisees and Scribes. They must do more than the Law and Prophets call for, Jesus says. He means they are to care for those who are described in the Beatitudes: the poor and crushed in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the hungry, the thirsty, the persecuted. The disciples' mission will be to lift people out of their dark despair and into the transforming light of mercy and justice. They are to act in ways that let people discern the flags of dawn already on the hills' that let people glimpse the transforming power of the Realm of Heaven that will one day be fully present, clearly visible.

Salt and light: that's who we are to be as Jesus' followers. We are to be a catalyst for change. We are to lighten the darkness of despair. Isaiah prophesies to Israel, "You shall be called the repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets to live in." This is the high standard of discipleship we are measured against; it's the identity we hope to be known as in the community.

How are we known, I wonder, this rather imposing structure at the corner of King and Cline? Uh-oh. We might not look very welcoming. But my hope is that some people will see our sign and say, "Oh. That's a church that welcomes all people, especially LGBTQ2 folks." I hope we can let people know we are serious about learning to fight climate change. About Indigenous land claims and treaties. How can we let people know we have great music, everything from violins and cellos and winds to bongo drums and shakers and chimes and a grand piano? How can we let them know we sing music from all over the world, honouring Christians wherever they worship? That today we sang in Xhosa, an African language? I hope people walking by know we have a really active

outreach ministry with people in need. Surely these are ways we want to be known!

As we contemplate MacNeill's future and our place in this city, we might find it helpful to think deeply about those words Jesus used: salt of the earth; light of the world. Let's be that salt, that catalyst for the fire of imagination, invention, action on behalf of people who are suffering? Let's invite Christ to shape us into light that illuminates those on the margins, waiting to hear good news. It's not so much what WE can do but what God in Christ Jesus is already doing, shaping us with scripture, molding us into a church of salt and light.