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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, February 5, 2023

5 Epiphany, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112:1-10

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Matthew 5:13-20

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Probably the best cooking tip I ever learned was: when in doubt, add a little more salt.

It was in a cookbook I saw a few years back and it changed the way I cook. The idea was that home cooks tend to undersalt things, to treat salt as a condiment to be added at the end rather than as an ingredient to be added throughout to help build up flavor at different steps along the way. That's within reason, of course. There's such a thing as too much salt, both for taste and for our health. Nobody wants to bite into a big spoonful of pure salt. But in the right proportion, what salt does isn't so much to make things salty as to bring out their flavors, to make every ingredient just a little more vivid, a little more delightful.

Light is like that too. We need light to see by, but what we look at mostly isn't the light itself but the things it illuminates. Nobody wants to look straight into the sun or a bright light bulb. Nobody goes to a museum or an art gallery to admire the lighting. But without the lighting it's impossible to see the art we came there for.

Jesus tells his followers, which is to say he tells us, that we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And I think those images have a lot to say to us about our role in the world as followers of Jesus, which isn't about separatism, nor about domination. There are some forms of Christianity that think the role of Christians is to come apart from the world; to turn away from the corrupting influences of a dangerous secular society and form a pure enclave of Christian culture. But the vocation of light isn't to hide under a bushel basket but to light up the world. And the vocation of salt isn't to stay pure in a salt shaker but to get mixed up into the food and make the food fully alive.

There are also some forms of Christianity that think the role of Christians isn't to come apart from the world but to take it over. Some of these are all too prominent in our world today. A week or two ago I got a spam email from someone who was trying to get me to buy a baseball cap from his Christian-owned brand. The email made it clear that the owner's goal wasn't just to sell ball caps. "We will expand the brand into every area of clothing and apparel," it said, "and if the Lord blesses this brand monetarily we will work to take over every single segment of the market."¹

It went on to talk about how the existing companies in the U.S. economy are hopelessly secular and how Christians should band together with their dollars to create a Christian economy with companies dedicated to lobbying against abortion and same-sex marriage. Now this is just one spammer, but he represents a point of view that's increasingly prominent and dangerous in our culture.

¹ "The Hat Above All Hats. Made for the King Above All Kings."
https://www.finishers.io/expand_gods_territory_cart_is_closed, accessed Feb. 3, 2023.

We hear fundamentalist Christian leaders spreading the myth that the United States was founded as a Christian nation instead of a nation with freedom of religious practice and freedom from any one established religion. We see people trying to enshrine Christian symbols on public property or restrictive teachings on sex and gender that they *think* are Christian in public school curricula or legislation about public bathrooms.

I never heard Jesus tell his disciples to go out and seek special privileges as Christians. Last week in the Beatitudes I heard him tell us blessed are the meek and blessed are the poor in spirit. And this week he tells us that our role is to be salt and light in the world. As followers of Jesus we do have a role in the life of our society. And it's not to withdraw from it like salt that stays on a shelf, nor to dominate it like a quart of salt dumped over a plate of food. It's to bless the world and make it a better place, more itself, more alive.

For many years I've been a trainer in a training program for clergy and lay leaders in the Episcopal Church called the College for Congregational Development. One of the models we teach participants is about the core purpose of a congregation, why it is that we even have congregations and what they're for. The name of the model is Gather-Transform-Send, and the idea is that this is what congregations exist for: to gather the people God is calling into a household of faith, to be a place of transformation where we are changed, where we grow into the image of Jesus, and then to send these same people out into the world they live in to be salt and light. Each week at the end of the eucharist we pray that God will "send us out to do the work you have given us to do." And in this model we talk about four main areas of our lives that we are sent into.

The first is our life with family and friends: the people with whom we spend a huge percentage of our lives. This group includes chosen family or the family you live with or whoever your primary group of intimate relationships is. Our life in church, our life in Christ, should have an impact on our ability to be faithful and loving partners and children and parents and relatives and friends, to navigate closeness and conflict with integrity, to love and be loved, make mistakes, forgive and be forgiven. The second is our work life; and again this is different for everyone and can include paid and unpaid work, volunteering, homemaking, caring for children and elders and others in need of care, and so on. All of us do meaningful work of some kind in our lives and our life as a congregation should help strengthen each of us to be salt and light in our work lives. The third is our society and civic life. We are sent into our world to bless it and that affects how we use our dollars, our votes, our time, our marching feet, the letters we write, the causes we struggle for. And the fourth, paradoxically enough, is our church life: because even though most ministry takes place outside the walls of the church, there are those of us who are called to serve in paid or unpaid roles in some kind of ministry leadership, and all of us take our own role in the life and governance of the church.

At our vestry retreat later this month we will be working with this model to think together about how Incarnation is, and can grow more and more into, a place that gathers God's people together, that transforms us together more and more deeply into the image of Jesus Christ, and that sends us forth week after week to love and serve in our whole lives and especially in these four areas. This week as you're sent forth from this service I pray that you will know yourself as salt and light, and go forth not to withdraw from the world, nor to dominate it, but to love it, and serve it, and make it more alive.