

February 9, 2020

**The Rev. Barry P. Kubler
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Plant City, Fl.**

**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Matthew 5: 13-20**

In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen!

Chapter five of Matthew's gospel contains the opening words of what is commonly referred to in the church as Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." This morning Jesus follows his well known opening comments, referred to as the 'Beatitudes' - a portrait of blessings identifying who is truly fortunate and who is not - with a statement about salt and light. It is a statement that asks us to wrestle with our identity as his followers. In effect, Jesus is now asking us to find our place in his portrait of blessings.

My friends, for almost fifty years now, the membership of the Christian church in this country and in Europe, has been in decline. Following World War II, in the decades of the 50's and 60's, the church's voice and ministries held a significant place at the very heart of our society. The church's leaders enjoyed a certain public stature and respect. The church's opinions were valued as much at the civic table as they were at the communion table and dinner table. The church's ethics and moral compass were seen as the standard and guide for appropriate behavior. Parents would first look to the church in their efforts to teach their children about love and discipline.

However, as we all know, over time things change. Today, the role and influence of the church in our lives is much different. If the church is mentioned at all, it is usually in the context of some political debate, or because of some alleged inappropriate behavior on the part of its leaders. The church's voice has also been tempered, with the possible exception of its condemnation of extreme acts of violence. The values and ethics once represented by the church as essential to the formation of our children, and as a guide for daily living, are now considered just options among many others in our fast paced, you can have it all now, world. Just a few generations ago one could easily describe the church's role as indispensable in pursuit of the life Jesus characterized in the Beatitudes. Today it would be hard to describe the church as indispensable - especially as indispensable as the 'salt' and 'light' Jesus describes to us in our gospel message this morning.

If it is true for us today, that the church's role in our lives has diminished so dramatically - if we place our gospel story in context, how much more was it true for Jesus' earliest disciples. From what we know, Jesus' disciples were an odd and mixed group of fishermen, homemakers, tax collectors, and, eventually,

former Pharisees and assorted Gentiles. They were small in number. Unlike today, they had no organized church. They had no goals or vision statements like our own "Future Perfect." According to every standard we might use to measure the health of our own St. Peter's, the early church would be considered woefully anemic at best.

I find it interesting that none of the things that seem to us to be measures of strength - like the size of our budget, the expanse of our physical facilities, or how many people are participating in various activities - none of those things appear to be conditions Jesus establishes for usefulness in God's kingdom. For instance, Jesus did not say, 'You should be the salt of the earth,' as if we were somehow responsible for making ourselves into something useful. Nor does Jesus say, 'You will be the light of the world,' as if to suggest that God will somehow make this happen at the Second Coming of Christ.

No, my friends. There is no should, or will, about our potential. Instead, Jesus says, 'You are the salt of the earth,' and 'You are the light of the world.' Already. Right now. Not yesterday, tomorrow, or in the process of becoming. You have already arrived. You possess those attributes right now.

So, here's a question for us to ponder. What might it mean for St. Peter's - and for churches everywhere - not to look back at what we used to do, or be; but rather, to explore what it looks like to be the salt and light of the world today? Right now. Not yesterday or tomorrow, but today?

I would suggest that a starting point is to look at the nature of salt and light that Jesus speaks to. And the first thing I notice is that they are both God given. They are elements of nature, not something that we human beings have created or produced. For me, that resonates with what it means to be genuinely, and uniquely human. That is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. As followers of Jesus we are not self-made. My brothers and sisters, just like the disciples called by Jesus, we have been created by pure grace, out of the love and will of God. Our very being includes salt and light.

The second thing I discover about salt and light is that they are not rare. They are among the most ordinary of elements. And the same is true of Jesus' followers - of you and me. We are valuable, not because the world views us as a tradable commodity, or because we are rare and precious and costly, like gold and diamonds. Rather, we are valuable for the very reason that we are so common, so plentiful - humble elements in a world filled with similar elements - whose existence could be, and often is, easily taken for granted.

Yet, despite our commonality, we know that both salt and light are essential to life. Salt, for taste and preservation - light, for sustaining life and finding one's way. Both are good for the world, their value found in their usefulness. My brothers and sisters, the same is true of anyone who follows Jesus.

However, our goal is not to be valuable according to the world's standards. Our worth is not measured by whether we have the largest budget or staff, like we would typically measure in a for profit corporation. Our goal, my friends, is

not to have the most popular youth program, or the most professional choir, as if we were a franchise or a touring company. Like ordinary salt, or ordinary light, our goal is to be beneficial for God's purposes - useful, life-giving elements in the world. To the extent we are able to stay true to that calling, we will always give glory to God.

My brothers and sisters, while it is always dangerous to try and measure someone else's faithfulness, a more appropriate example of our faith's success, as Jesus obviously knew, is to look at the qualities of salt and light.

We tend to measure a church's success by the prominence of the congregation. And while it is certainly likely that faithful disciples can be found in churches with tall steeples in the center of town, faithful disciples are just as likely to be found in tiny emerging communities throughout our cities, where young adults gather in coffeehouses for safe and honest conversations about Jesus and the challenges of their faith.

We tend to measure a church's value by the number of people who show up for worship on Sunday. And while it is quite likely that faithful disciples are attending megachurches in the suburbs, it is just as likely that they are gathering in tiny, rural congregations that make sure their elderly neighbors are visited regularly, or that the poor and disadvantaged among them have food to eat.

We also tend to measure a church's worth by the material power and influence its members have accrued. And while it is likely that faithful disciples are to be found among the titans of commerce and politics, they are just as likely to be found among the unemployed, who quite often volunteer to help homeless people, or battered women, or underprivileged children - serving those who are in at least as much difficulty as they are.

My brothers and sisters, our effectiveness as disciples does not depend on our success according to the world's standards. If our faithfulness and discipleship is targeted toward having the most prominent, well-attended, powerful congregation in Plant City, then we are working toward the wrong goals. The point is not to give glory to ourselves, but to give glory to God. Doing that requires nothing more than the humility of being who we already are - the salt and light of the world.

If we fail to be true to God's purposes for us, using the gifts for ministry we already possess, then what good are we to the world? If we call ourselves Christians but have lost our true essence as salt, then people stop seeing us as useful for anything, and we squander Christ's good name. If we say we are followers of Jesus but have hidden Christ's light under our buildings, our bureaucracy, and our budgets, then we have robbed the world of God's good gifts.

My brothers and sisters, salt and light may not be the most glamorous elements in the universe, but they are worth far more than silver or gold. They are life giving and useful in so many ways. Their purpose, is God's purpose, to serve

the well-being of the world. As Jesus reminds us today, we are the salt and the light of the world. What will we do with those gifts today? Amen.