

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
February 5, 2023 – 5 Epiphany
Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20
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I often speak of Jesus as our teacher. Who were his teachers? Certainly, the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible were some of Jesus' teachers. In the second part of this morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel Jesus speaks about his relationship to "the law" and "the prophets." "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." What does he mean by these terms? Taken together, "the law and the prophets" is a way of saying "everything in holy scripture" or the Hebrew Bible of Jesus' time.

Jesus was a faithful and observant Jew, and much of his teaching came straight from the Hebrew Bible. This is one way in which Jesus "fulfills" scripture, by teaching the same basic lessons, as well as living by them. Consider this morning's reading from the prophet Isaiah, written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. We can easily recognize Isaiah's message in Jesus' teachings.

God has a message for Isaiah to shout to the Jewish people about how they have gone wrong in living in relationship with God. The people have observed proper religious practices, such as fasting, but for selfish reasons, to gain divine intervention in their troubles and for their own salvation. They fast at the same time as their business goes on as usual and their workers are oppressed, at the same time as they continue to quarrel and fight. God wants no part of such a fast! God wants no part of hypocritical religious practice! God wants changed hearts and lives. Real devotion to God and humility before God creates within a person the desire for justice for the weak, compassion for the downtrodden, and charity for the poor. This is the fast that God wants, a fast that requires much more of a person than not eating food for some period of time. And this is the fast that God will reward with divine help and guidance and healing.

Jesus carried on Isaiah's teaching. And like the prophets before him, Jesus confronted the religious leaders and people of his day about their hypocritical behavior. "You hypocrite!" is a phrase Jesus used often as he strongly criticized people for judging others, for being pious or giving alms or praying to impress other people rather than for God, for paying attention to the details of religious practice while ignoring the main message. Jesus was very hard on hypocrites.

Now let's go back to the first portion of today's reading from Matthew, a lesson about discipleship. Jesus is speaking to his followers when he says, "You are the salt of the earth," "You are the light of the world." Let's consider what Jesus may mean.

First, Jesus is telling his followers that this is what they are, not what they should be or what they will be, but what they are. Salt and light are God-given elements of nature, not made by human beings. Though ordinary and common, salt and light are

very valuable because of their usefulness in the world. So, what is Jesus saying to us about being his disciples? For one thing, we do not make ourselves disciples of Christ. We are made by God, called by Jesus to follow him. We are ordinary people. Jesus calls – and always has called – ordinary people to follow him. We are meant to be useful in the world, to enhance and guide the life of the world. We do this by being who we are, followers of Jesus. We have a responsibility in this. We must not be salt that has lost its saltiness or light that is hidden under a bushel basket. We must not be followers of Jesus in name only. We must act like disciples of Christ, so that others “may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father in heaven.”

Jesus is pointing his disciples toward their mission in the world. Neither salt nor light exists for its own sake. They have a function to fulfill in the world. Salt that loses its taste and a lamp hidden under a bushel are not doing what they are meant to do. Here Jesus is elaborating on a message from the Hebrew Bible, that God’s people are “blessed in order to be a blessing” to others (Genesis 12:2; 22:18). We are meant to shine in the world, to behave in ways that lead others to give thanks and praise to God.

In the service of ordination to the priesthood, the Bishop says, “My brother, my sister, the Church is the family of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. All baptized people are called to make Christ known as Savior and Lord, and to share in the renewing of his world” (The Book of Common Prayer, page 531). That is your call as well as mine. I hope and pray that each of us will take that call seriously every day of our lives, in every circumstance in which we find ourselves. In what we think, in what we pray, and in what we say and do. This is the work of every Christian, according to scripture and according to church tradition: to show forth the saving love of Christ and to work for the renewal of the world. It is not easy to follow the teaching and example of Jesus now, in these challenging days. But it never has been. Christians have always faced challenging situations in the world, and it has always been a struggle for faithful people to decide how to shape their behavior according to the will of God. We need to think deeply about how to do that in these challenging days, and we need to help and encourage one another.

The “work” of salt cannot be seen. I wonder how the call of Christ has touched the hearts and lives of the people here at St. Columba’s in ways that no one sees. What miracles of faith and grace might be revealed if we could see in each other what is now seen by God alone? What repentance? What courage? What love? What generosity and forbearance? What forgiveness and mercy? What trust in God? We do not know, but I suspect that we would be astounded to see how Christ has transformed the hearts of the people gathered here on Sunday mornings.

Jesus said to his disciples, “You are the light of the world.” We are called to share the light of Christ with one another and with the world, for the well-being of others and to the glory of God. Jesus gave us the light. May we let it shine, unhidden and undimmed, in Jesus’ name. Amen.