1-29-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 5:13-20 Choose Light Choosing God’s Kingdom Series

Several years ago our small rural NW OH town was hit with an ice storm…that promptly knocked out power to the entire town. I remember Ken decided to drive uptown that evening—I have no idea why—and came home to say it was eerie how dark the town was without street lights and stop lights and lights shining forth from homes and businesses. He quickly figured out which neighbors had their own generators, as their light was evident.

My sister Jen likes to tease me that she goes through the house turning lights off, and I go through the house turning lights on. I am not a big fan of the darkness. I long to see the sunshine after the cloudiness of even this past week. I am not sure I could ever survive living above the Arctic Circle, where light is never taken for granted.

.. In Tromso, Norway, for example, from mid-November to mid-January, the sun does not rise above the horizon. On a good day they may only get two hours of indirect light around midday.

From August until mid-November, residents can count on losing 10 to 15 minutes of light each day until the depths of the winter solstice. At this time of year they are slowly beginning to add a little more light to each day.

-- Homileticsonline.com 2-4-96 “Lamplight vs. Starlight”

I believe that our human nature is drawn toward light, drawn toward hope, drawn toward goodness. I believe that deep within each of us is a longing for the light of God. Yet we live in a dark, struggling, violent world where often that light is hard to see. Turn on the news or read the internet headlines and count how many stories have something to do with violence, death or fear. Consider how many with mental illness or various addictions are unable to get the treatment that they need or desire. We live in a constantly connected world where men and women are lonelier than ever before. How often do you yearn for even one story of good news? How often do you yearn for even one small flicker of light shining in the darkness?

Have you ever considered that God calls us to be that light, shining as a ray of hope pointing to God in our darkened world?

Today Jesus says to us: You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.

This affirmation of our identity builds upon what we heard last week from Jesus in the Beatitudes. Last week Jesus said, You are blessed. Not you WILL be blessed. Not happy are you WHEN… Not blessed IF… Simply You ARE blessed. Here. Now. A promise. A gift. For all.

Once again today we are listening in to Jesus teaching his disciples in what is called the Sermon on the Mount. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus’ core ministry is teaching, and his core teaching is the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God calls us to a different reality of living that follows God’s directives on how to live.

Today Jesus reaffirms our foundation by saying, You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. Not this is what you *ought* to be doing, this is how you *should* be living, this is what you *must* strive to become. Just you are already salt and light.

The challenge is…what kind of salt and light are we?

When you think of salt, do you think of road salt or do you think of that seasoning your doctor has told you to stay away from? Nowadays we don’t think of salt as having much value. Yet in the ancient world, salt was a highly prized commodity.

Sodium chloride in the time of Jesus was used as a preservative for food long before refrigeration. It was also used to bind covenants and in Temple rituals and sacrifices. Salt was used at births and baptisms. Some cultures even exchanged salt as currency. Salt was essential to daily living, and sometimes soldiers were even paid in salt— think of the word salary.

Nowadays health experts tell us that we eat too much salt on a daily basis, but imagine the flavor of your favorite foods without any salt or seasoning. Salt is not an element to eat by itself—salt exists to be used with food, to enhance other elements.

Such is also the case as we are described by Jesus as the salt of the earth. We are not to exist merely for ourselves, for our own spiritual growth or our own selfish desires. Like salt, we are called to mix with the culture around us, not in a way that we lose our saltiness, but in a way where we flavor our circumstances with the kingdom of God in this world.

Think about the office manager who will not demean others just to climb the corporate ladder.

Think about the politician who admits to his mistakes. Think about the teenager who stands by her conviction to remain sexually pure before marriage. Think about the young couple who sacrificially assist a neighbor in need without any thought of repayment.

When these actions are rooted in faith, they can be like salt in our culture, gently showing others how to live by God’s kingdom ways.

Imagine living in the time of Jesus, before electricity and light pollution. Can you imagine how dark the world would have been at night, especially on a cloudy night, and how comforting a lamp, a candle, a fire would have been in the midst of a dark world? Oil was precious; wicks were not to be wasted. So to have light was a gift, for you and for those around you to be able to see.

Jesus describes all of us as the light of the world. We, too, are to be a gift to those around us, allowing them to see Jesus through us, through our lives and through our churches. We are called to be like lighthouses that magnify God’s light and hope and love in this world.

.. Near the eastern end of the Bahamas archipelago there is a mere strip of sand called Castle Island. Castle Island’s lighthouse is its sole source of humanity!

One day, a young man was sailing in the area. He anchored his sailboat off of the lighthouse and swam to shore to exercise his legs on the beach. The lighthouse keeper, Cedric Hanna, was surprised and delighted to have company; he invited the young man to join him for some fresh-caught lobster and a tour of the lighthouse.

The young man climbed the winding staircase to the lantern room at the top of the stairs; and, he was astonished at the size of the light that signaled safe passage through the maze of shoals and reefs! The light was a tiny kerosene flame - barely bright enough to read by – yet, with the aid of mirrors and reflectors, it was visible twenty-five miles out to sea.

The story of Castle Island reminds each and every one of us that even the most insignificant action or deed on our part - such as giving up our place in the grocery store check-out line to a mother with a fretful baby - or, a short two-line note in a neighbor’s mailbox - or, a smile and a "hello" to a toll-booth attendant – even such faint candles as these, can be multiplied by Almighty God to shine like beacons in a dark world!

--Sources: 1. "Daily Guideposts, 1998”2. "Leaves of Gold," Revised Edition, p. 117.

From a sermon by George Dillahunty, Light Up Your World!, 6/18/2010;

found on sermoncentral.com, adapted

Notice that these images of salt and light have a purpose that is greater than themselves. Their usefulness is in drawing attention to something beyond themselves.

…When used in seasoning food, salt works best when it enhances the flavor of the meal and is not even noticed by the one eating. Similarly, a well-placed lamp is one that does not itself stand out, but rather illumines well what is noteworthy in the room. Just so, the effect of the disciples’ good works is not to attract attention to themselves, but to point to God, who is to be glorified. -Barbara Reid “Parables for Preachers” p.54

Yet have you ever prayed anything along these lines: “Father, let my light shine before people in such a way that they may see my good works and glorify you”?

Rev Andy Stanley admits,

..I don’t hear prayers like that very often. Our prayers hover close to our personal visions and dreams. All too often we focus our prayer energies on trying to get God to bless something, change somebody, or grant us success with a project. Yet [God] is far more interested in the consistency of our light in environments where light is not appreciated. All our projects, dreams, and visions are merely potential opportunities for the Father to draw attention and people to himself.

--Rev Andy Stanley in the devotional Visioneering via Cindee Johnson on Facebook

Jesus reminds us that we are all salt and light. Yet he also warns us not to lose our saltiness and not to hide our lights. Sadly, most polls by George Barna and others show that we Christians we are not being very effective salt and light in our communities.

At work, can you observe your co-workers and tell by their ethics and relational skills who is a believer and who is simply a good person? On the ball court, can you tell by listening to the language of your friends who honors the Lord and who does not? At home, are children observing an authentic faith lived out by their parents on a daily basis, or are they observing only a faith lived out for one or two hours a week at the church?

I love the children’s song, “This Little Light of Mine.” *(sing… first verse)*

There are many verses to that song, yet remember the verse *(sing… hide it under a bushel…)*

To use precious oil to light a lamp, then cover that lamp with a bushel basket would be a ridiculous waste. Jesus is saying here it is not something anyone in their right mind would do!

Yet how often do we hide the light of God within us, afraid of allowing God’s light to shine? How often do we use our own bushel baskets of fear and doubt and insecurity to cover God’s light in our own lives? How often are we willing to let our light shine within the community of the faithful here at church, yet are hesitant to share our faith outside of these walls? How often do we allow our saltiness to dry out, rendering it ineffective?

We are called to treasure these gifts of God, to be salt and be light in ways that effectively bring glimpses of God’s kingdom ways into our lives today.

.. Joe Aldrich, author of the book Life-Style Evangelism, once said:

"Christians are to be good news before they share the good news."

--Steven Chapman “Developing Contagious Christian Character” 4-01 sermoncentral.com

When we live as salt and light we are being the good news of God before we ever say a word about Jesus, faith or church. Yet do our actions draw others to God’s light or repel them from God’s love long before we ever open our mouths to speak the name of Jesus? Unfortunately we all know the horror stories of people saying if that is the way Christians treat each other than I want no part in it. Or they say if you can be such a hypocrite between Saturday night and Sunday morning then what good is faith.

"Christians are to be good news before they share the good news."

.. I heard of a business owner who, as a seeker, had employed scores of Christians in his company. He watched them like a hawk. "You know," he said, “I was naturally drawn to God by observing Christian workers who were conscientious and kind and thorough and aggressive on the job. But I’ll tell you what really impressed me. One day a guy who I knew to be a fresh convert asked if he could see me after work. I agreed to meet with him, but later in the day I started to worry that this young religious zealot might be coming to try to convert me, too."

"I was surprised when he came in my office with his head hanging low and said to me, ’Sir, I’ll only take a few minutes, but I’m here to ask your forgiveness. Over the years I’ve worked for you I’ve done what a lot of other employees do, like borrowing a few company products here and there. And I’ve taken some extra supplies; I’ve abused telephone privileges; and I’ve cheated the time clock now and then.

"But I became a Christian a few months ago and it’s real – not the smoke and mirror stuff. In gratitude for what Christ has done for me and in obedience to Him, I want to make amends to you and the company for the wrongs I’ve done. So could we figure out a way to do that? If you have to fire me for what I’ve done, I’ll understand. I deserve it. Or, if you want to dock my pay, dock it whatever figure you think is appropriate. If you want to give me some extra work to do on my own time, that would be okay, too, I just want to make things right with God and between us.’"

Well they worked things out. And the business owner said that this conversation made a deeper spiritual impact on him than anything else ever had. It was the single most impressive demonstration of true Christianity he had ever witnessed.

--Steven Chapman “Developing Contagious Christian Character” 4-01 sermoncentral.com

The Gospel of Matthew calls us to high standards of discipleship. Living as disciples of Jesus, following God’s ways in the midst of this world, is not easy. Have you ever read these passages and thought, “Jesus, there is no way I can live up to these expectations?” Especially when he calls us to have a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees! The Pharisees studied, taught and lived the Law with every waking breath. They were actually seen not as corrupt leaders but as the standard bearers for upholding the Law, including not only the Ten Commandments but also the other regulations that had grown up around those commandments. And Jesus challenges us to obey God’s commands better than those religious leaders!

How is that possible? It is a high standard for us to live by. And I admit, I don’t always live up to it. Yet what I believe Jesus is calling us to is a return to the intention of the Law rather than obedience to every minute detail of the law. How do we live by justice, by mercy, by faith.

How do we take all that we know about God and live it out in concrete ways every day of our lives that is more than a checklist of dos and don’ts, but rather a way of being in relationship with those around us that reflects the love of God.

…In an article entitled "Reflect the Light," Roble Nebres tells about the time he drove to the summit of Mt. Haleakala. After watching the sunset it became dark and he became anxious about the descent down the steep, winding road. When he left the parking lot the median strips on the road suddenly came alive with reflectorized lights. They provided a much needed directional guide on the mountain road.

The reflectors illuminated the way for Nebres, who made his descent safely down the treacherous mountain road. The reflectors, however, were useless without his headlights shining on them. The light they gave depended on the light from another source. Otherwise they could not help him see.

When Jesus told his disciples they were the "light of the world," he meant they were to be reflectors of the light of God. God is the illuminating source. God provides the light that is reflected from us. And God needs us to be reflectors of God's light to a world of darkness.

--Keith Wagner, Are We Hiding Our Faith? Sermons.com

So in what ways do you choose to reflect the light of God within you, so that others may we God through you? In what ways are you salt in your everyday life, choosing to influence others by following God’s ways rather than the world’s ways?

Choose love over hate. Choose forgiveness over vengeance. Choose to listen to another’s story before you judge them.

..Years ago someone asked the preacher and writer Eugene Peterson what he would say if he were writing what he knew would be his very last sermon. He replied,

“I think I would want to talk about things that are immediate and ordinary. In the kind of world we live in, the primary way that I can get people to be aware of God is to say, ‘Who are you going to have breakfast with tomorrow, and how are you going to treat that person?'”

Peterson suggests we need to stop thinking that being a Christian means always being part of only obvious religious contexts. We just need to pay attention to what the people around us are doing most every day and then help them do it in ways that glorify God.

“In my last sermon, I guess I’d want to say, ‘Go home and be good to your spouse. Treat your children with respect. Do a good job at work.” We need to be salt in the real world, and that involves genuinely being with real people, listening to them well, and treating them as the little images of God they all are.

-Scott Hoezee 2-3-14 cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany 5a

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. These are gifts from God.

“Make your light shine, so that others will see the good that you do and will praise your Father in heaven.”

May it be so in all of our lives.

Let us pray.