

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus has just concluded the Beatitudes and then makes an amazing series of statements. He moves from the qualities and character of his followers...blessed are you....and moves into who they are to be in the world. They are not going to live in isolation from the world but in relationship with the world.

We are designed for relationships. One of the very clear messages of Jesus was that the people gathered as disciples are gathered only to be sent out again. They would reach out to the world around them with the "Good News" that they had received and experienced with Christ. Being in relationship, with God and with each other, as the natural order of things...is the very reason why we were created in the first place.

So, today's scripture focuses on God's view of who we are...in terms of who Jesus says we ought to be in our relationship with God, with family and friends, and with our world.

"You are the salt of the earth..." "You are the light of the world..."

Speaking of "salt and light", there was an article by a pastor who told a story of how he and his wife decided to have the church council and the husbands and wives of the council members over to dinner. It was quite an undertaking, but then this pastor and his wife wanted to be "salt and light" for the leaders of their church. When it came time for dinner, everyone was seated and the pastor's wife asked her four year old daughter if she would like to say grace. The girl replied that she did not know what to say and the mom said, "Just say what I say honey." Everyone bowed their head and the little girl said, "O dear Lord, why am I having all these people for dinner!"

Anyway, back to Jesus...who was criticized for his relationships. One of the charges against Jesus was that he associated with the wrong people. "He is a friend of sinners," they said. Jesus told his followers, "They call me a glutton and a drunkard..."the false news of the day, I suppose. But...Jesus came with a mission and a purpose that become the mission and purpose of all who claim to follow him. He was very clear about who his followers were to be in this world...using words that are a statement of God's view of who we are:

"You are the salt of the earth..." "You are the light of the world..."

Very powerful things to say about who we are but, in our day, we do not understand or get the connotation or connection! They were astonishing statements to make...especially in that day. Salt was so valuable in the ancient world that the Greeks called it divine. A Latin jingle, "Nil utilius sole et sale." means that "there is nothing more useful than sun and salt." There were times when Roman soldiers received their wages in salt and, in fact, the Latin word for salt is the root for our word, "salary."

It is hard for us to understand the value of salt in the ancient world...except perhaps for those who grew up on the farm years ago. You have heard the phrase to rub salt in wounds...salt can be used to purify a wound, and in the centuries before refrigeration, salt was used as a preservative.

Nearby Syracuse owes its existence and prosperity to the salt industry, dating back to Civil War meat provisions for Union troops.

We also have a relative disconnect with how the ancients valued light. As we live in the world after Thomas Edison, we are almost never at the mercy of wherever the sun happens to be. We live in illusory control of light, able to create it with the flick of a switch...and are at a complete loss, at the complete mercy, of a break down with National Grid or the electric utility of your choice. Of course, for most of human history this has not been so.

The “bushel” Jesus mentions here is not a unit of measurement. Instead, he refers to a vessel big enough to cover a lamp, in describing a light not snuffed out but covered up. The light is not extinguished, but rather it is rendered ineffective.

What are the bushels that cover our parish light? What are they? Maybe the bushel is an inferiority complex, a lack of confidence that comes from chronically comparing ourselves to the bigger churches across town...or to the good, old days when our church was full of children and youth. The inferiority bushel blocks out God’s light.

Or perhaps the bushel is the self-absorption of internal conflicts. While conflict is an expected part of any human organization, when conflict becomes an excuse for unproductive institutional self-absorption, then it is a bushel that prevents our light from shining.

We can hear the incredulous tone in Jesus voice, “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel” He thinks it is ridiculous! We are not victims, inevitably doomed to being distracted and drained by whatever bushels exist...they can only block out the light when we *put them there*.

So, in plain English, Jesus adds to his comments... "If salt is not salty, it is of no use... and ... If light does not shine, people cannot see!"

Notice the present tense as Jesus tells his followers they are salt and light now, not in some distant future. His teaching is not only about what the Kingdom of God is, but centrally about who *we* are, what our new lives in this new realm look like...tasty and lit up.

Those who follow Jesus do not merely sit back and receive abundant life, or simply tell others about what a great abundant life we have. He is talking here about a life that makes a difference for others in the world.

God calls us to think of ourselves as “tasty and lit up.” Imagine that! *We are* the tastiness that adds salt to lives around us. *We are* light that makes plain the justice way of the kingdom of God. We must be tasty and lit up in order to make a difference for God in the world, because neither salt nor light exist for themselves. They only fulfill their purpose when used. When they are poured out.

This passage from Matthew is a great opportunity to come to a proper understanding about evangelism. The E-word has fallen out of use in many circles, but precisely because it seems too threatening because the emphasis is perceived to be on the wrong subject. Evangelism is NOT about coming to church, so that the numbers in the pews get better and the bills get paid. Instead, at its root, evangelism is “good news-ism.” Good news-ism is a way of life, tasty and lit up for a world stumbling in darkness. Too many, both promoters and receivers, are captive to the lie that they are not Christian enough

or sober enough or church-going enough or know the Bible enough to be claimed by God.

The good news is that Jesus has already opened the Kingdom of God to everyone, regardless of who is righteous or deserving. That is the good news, pure and simple. The challenge for us, in this day and time, is to be bold enough to realize, and live into, who God already knows and claims us to be. And that is being “bushel-free”. Letting our lives shine with good news of Jesus, welcoming the lost from death to life, from shame to forgiveness, from wandering in an alien land to coming home to God’s very life.

As Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message translation of Matthew 5:15-16, “Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you will prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”

So, let us live the tasty, lit-up life, in celebrating relationship with our loving God, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.