

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (February 5, 2017)

Text: Matthew 5:13-20

Title: The Point

This may trouble the more Anglo-Catholic among you, but I am no good at fasting. I respect that for many people not eating on days like Good Friday is a practice that focuses prayer and brings them closer to God. But I also know that for others, like me, deprivation does not serve as a helpful reminder of our dependence on God, but an all-consuming distraction. My husband, knowing this about me, nevertheless once asked if I'd try a four-week liver cleanse with him. The cleanse did not require eating any *less*, only that we stay away from processed foods, caffeine, sugar, salt, alcohol, gluten – the usual offenders. I decided to give it a go. It was surprisingly easy for me to abstain from most of the forbidden items, but by dinner on day one, I knew I would not be able to abide the letter of the cleanse: I simply could not give up salt. The meal before me included some of my favorite fresh, organic, locally sourced foods. It smelled delicious. It looked delectable. But it tasted like baby food. A travesty.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus tells his disciples. It has always struck me that in the Sermon on the Mount – his first extended teaching; discipleship training 101, if you will - Jesus is not the least bit concerned with telling his followers what to *believe*. Instead, he tells them who they *are*, and *how to live*. He begins by assuring them they are blessed beyond measure, in joy and in sorrow, as we heard last week. And then he offers these two strange but compelling metaphors - you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world - all leading up to a crucial teaching about how his followers are to relate to the law.

Salt and light. Such ordinary, extraordinary things. The first that sorcerer's stone of minerals, capable of turning pureed peas and carrots into a culinary delight by eliciting and enhancing the natural flavors around it. And light: the source of all the energy coursing through earth's ecosystems. The means by which we see. The communicator of warmth and comfort. But what do they have in common? Salt and light are good, essential, life-giving things. But they are both means to an end, not ends in and of themselves. We don't sit down to a nourishing meal of ... salt, and yet a meal is made infinitely more enjoyable by it, and denied it entirely we would fail to flourish. We don't wake up excited to go see light, but to delight in the world light enables us to see. Without it, life would fail to be life as we know it, if not simply fail to be. Because salt and light are so ubiquitous, so essential, we can easily take them for granted, not even noticing them until they aren't there, like *I* did on my cleanse, or like *we* do during a particularly long, dark winter (or summer, here in San Francisco). Salt and light are good, essential, life-giving things, but when they are mistaken for “the point,” in and of themselves, trouble ensues. Eating too much salt will dry you out and raise your blood pressure. Keep your light hidden, and you may find yourself burning rather than beaming.

These are such rich, evocative images that it is tempting to linger here and forget the rest of this morning's Gospel, but then we really would miss “the point.” As a faithful Jew, Jesus was constantly teaching from and about Torah – the law - engaged in an ongoing and rigorous debate that captivated the Jewish people then and now. Christians have generally been taught that Jesus freed us from the burden the law because we have been saved by grace through faith, not works righteousness. But then again, here he is today, saying exactly the opposite, proclaiming that he has not come to *abolish* the law or the prophets, but to *fulfill* them. It's helpful to know that

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount concludes with this summary: 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for **this** is the law and the prophets.'¹

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you. Of course Jesus would invite us to live so simply and so well, to show others the compassion, gentleness, trust, generosity, and love we long for ourselves. The law made life not only more meaningful and enjoyable – it made life, a full, abundant truly human life, flowing out of connection to God – possible. The law is a good, essential, life-giving thing. But, Jesus seems to be saying, like salt and light, the law itself is not the point. The law is the means to an end, the end being perfect union with God.

Why in the world does this matter? Because Jesus saw some of the most faithful, earnest, committed people around him mistaking the law *for* God, so concerned with following the rules that they lost sight of where they were headed. And though their misdirected zeal might have annoyed or angered him, it probably also broke his heart. There they were trying so hard, getting frustrated, judging themselves and other so harshly, all because they'd confused the menu for the meal.

And here's the terribly troubling, terrifically telling extension of today's Gospel for us: that the *Church* is a good, essential, life-giving thing, but it, too, is not the point. For far too long, many Christians have comforted themselves with checking the Sunday morning worship box, like faith was a once-weekly vitamin prescribed by God and not a wildly demanding, inexplicably joyful way of life. If ever we have worried over the popularity of a program, the palatability of our proclamation, the beauty of a worship service – lovely and good as all those things can be - more than *doing unto others as we would have them do to us*, we have been as tragically distracted as the Scribes and Pharisees.

The point of the Church is to be drawn into the heart of God. To be emboldened in loving God, neighbor and self with reckless abandon. And by missing the point, humble, justice-seeking, mercy-loving Christians have, at times, failed to elicit the flavors of love, compassion, and generosity from the communities around us. We have, at times, hidden our lights under the bushel, allowing darkness to grow and creep into once bright and beautiful spaces. Perhaps the fear, anxiety, and despair plaguing so much of the world today are symptoms of our absence, our shyness, our silence. Maybe, like salt and light, we only notice how essential an authentic Christian witness is to the well-being of the world when it is missing.

As I prepare to leave St. Mary's in just a couple weeks, I look back on all we have created together, enjoyed together, endured together. I think of hopeful baptisms. Heart-wrenching funerals. Beautiful music. Happy holy days. Laughter and meals. Classes and calls. And I give thanks to God for all of it. But I'm also aware that, as much as I've loved every being Church with you, my hope has always been that in and through these things we were all being drawn closer to the heart of God. That we were all cultivating the courage to follow Jesus into a world that was so at odds with him that it put him to death. If I have been a faithful priest to you in these last two and a half years, this would be the real measure of it.

For my part, I want you to know that you have been lights for me in dark places. That your love for me and my love for you has illumined the path ahead in times of confusion and fear. So my parting prayer is this: that, just as you have offered this gift to me, you will find ways to offer it to ever-widening circles around you.

Go and be salt where life is bland, where all seems without meaning and flavor.

¹ Matthew 7:12.

Go and be light in the darkness, where your life-giving warmth and comfort will matter most.

Go and be law-loving, justice-seeking Jesus freaks, wherever he happens to take you.

You are blessed beyond measure, in joy and in sorrow, and God will be with you, and God will be with me. **Amen.**