

SALT AND LIGHT AND FULFILLING THE LAW
Isaiah 58: 1-12; Matthew 5: 13-20
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany • February 5, 2023
by Pat Berger

So. Do you feel blessed as you go about going about in your week? Our reading from the Gospel of Matthew this morning is from what we call the Sermon on the Mount. The first verses of this chapter tell about blessings, and: we are blessed. That is just the way that it is. So absorb that one, because it only gets better when we get to the verses in today's reading. We are blessed. Further, we are the salt of the earth. And more than that, we are also the light of the world.

We are blessed, because God says that we are. It is the same with being salt and light. We aren't salt and light when we get to be the best we can be; we aren't salt and light because we are better than anyone else; we are salt and light because we are God's beloved children, and that is just the way that it is. These are promises from God, through Jesus, for each of the beloved children.

We don't know why Jesus used salt rather than some other image to make his point; it isn't really important. We do know that salt brings out, enhances the flavors of foods to which it is added. "Salt to taste," some recipes say, which lets us know that this isn't a one-amount-fits-all sort of seasoning. As I fixed dinner one night, I was reminded that when the lid falls off the salt shaker, it is probably not even possible to take enough salt out of a dish. And we aren't called to be too much salt -- just the amount that encourages others to see the love of God through our actions. The same is true as we work at being the light of the world. It isn't necessary that we be strobe lights or flashing or flashy lights; we simple need to be the kind of light that leads people to see God's love.

It wasn't easy for Jesus' first listeners to figure this out, any more than it is for us, even though we have some clues. His first listeners would have known the words we heard from Isaiah this morning and been able to use them as one of their models. These verses are some of my favorites

in Isaiah; it sounds as if God might be having a little rant: is this what you think I want in the way of a fast? Is this what you think I'm after, serving your own interests, quarreling and fighting? Here is what I have in mind for my children: loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, share with those who have less -- that's what is needed; that is what I have in mind.

Fasting, in God's mind, had much more to do with giving food to those who had none than it had to do with those who had plenty abstaining from food. Who is the one who is tied to a yoke? Who is the one who is oppressed? Help even one of those, God said; this is the fast that I choose. And when one does those things, one might be called -- one of my favorite verses, and one toward which each of us might strive in these days -- one might be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. Imagine repairing even one tiny breach, restoring even a small portion of a street.

And we can do that! We are the salt. We are the light. Think of ways that God has used you in the past couple of weeks or so. How have you been an encouragement to someone? How have you been faithful in a job or in a volunteer task? Perhaps you have offered prayer for someone, or visited someone, or taken a pot of soup, or kept a commitment. It may seem a small thing that you have done, and yet: our God can use very small actions to change our world. And God does. We know this; we may know it better than we believe it sometimes. The more we believe it, the easier it will be for us to put it into action.

Think about how important it is for us to put our salt-ness and our light-ness into action, right now. When we read the headlines, or watch the news, we hear about divisions in our community and in our country and in our world that are particularly disturbing. And: we are salt, and we are light. We wouldn't all agree on what that might mean, what might be done to repair or restore -- and that does not allow us to sit by and not do and be our best for God's Kingdom.

I'm only one, we might say. And: you are one! We are only a small church, we might say. And: we are a church! Think about those coins we have been collecting for Change for Change. This quarter, we are collecting for the Warm Springs tribe. Think of the amount of water they will be able to buy with our coins. On Super Bowl Sunday, which is coming right up, we will be contributing so that some hungry folk might have more to eat. Our denomination is collecting per capita tax from its members right now; a portion of what we give goes to support our General Assembly, a portion goes for Synod expenses, and a portion stays in our Presbytery for salaries, meeting expenses and such. One Great Hour of Sharing is coming right up; again, we have the opportunity to assist those who have less with our contributions.

And there are the things that we do right here, serving on committees, keeping the building in good shape, keeping the grounds in good shape, checking in with each other, praying for and with each other. We are loved; we are blessed; we are salt; we are light. God is not done with any of us yet. Our deeds, our words, our prayers are actions that make God's work in the Kingdom happen. May that ever be so.

Let us pray.