



AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT

Isaiah 58:4b-12; Matthew 5:13-16

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Jesus makes some profoundly demanding claims in the Sermon on the Mount about our relationship to possessions, to one another, to the stranger, to the poor, and to God that, following them, would instantly, completely change all of our lives. Commands like “Give to all that ask”, “Judge Not”, “Turn the other cheek”, “If someone sues you for your coat give them your cloak as well,” all ask more than we are willing or able to do.

To this fact I think we must first conclude that to do so would be impossible. Not even the disciples came close, not by a mile. So we can give ourselves grace or rather accept God’s. Having said that we need to be sure grace does not become an excuse for not striving to be as faithful as we can be. Precisely what Christ asks of us in our daily living can be difficult and, knowing our role as a church in changing times, can be confusing.

Fortunately, a section from the Sermon on the Mount, our passage this morning, can serve as our marching instructions for being the church in today’s world.

In the midst of the first few weeks of the presidential transition of power, our country finds itself in a place of uncertainty. Extensive changes in short order has led to masses protesting the changes and others applauding it.

The temptation each of us faces is to respond from the amygdala, that ancient part of our brain that reacts from emotion and drives fear and aggression, along with whichever political identity we have aligned ourselves. We have become so divided as a country that, as individuals, we almost cannot help a knee-jerk reaction either for or against what is happening, based on how we voted.

But a word of caution. Our call as Christians is not to align ourselves with any earthly power or

ideology, either for or against. Instead, at all times we are to seek out the mind of Christ.

Thankfully Jesus gives us our role in the world and it is found in Matthew’s Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount. In these chapters, he cautions us against anger, judgement, and retaliation while charging us to love everyone, especially our enemies.

But there is a particularly task Jesus gives his followers, and the church, in our passage this morning that I think is especially pertinent for the role he wants us to play today – Salt and Light.

Jesus tells us if we fail to be salty Christians than we become worthless.

Salt was the sign of covenant in Judaism. It was used to signify and seal the agreement. To be the salt *of the earth* is to serve as the sign and seal of God’s will for the entire world. Jesus’ words about un-salty salt being only good for the trash heap is a not-so-veiled threat to churches that if we lose our purpose we will lose our life.

Salt, in addition to being a sign of the covenant, was a magic household item that served numerous critical functions in the ancient world.

Of course it served as a food preservative during times when there was no canning or refrigeration. It stood between people and starvation.

People are starving in this world for not just good news but THE good news! The church’s call is to give people bread that fills the stomach absolutely! But even more the bread that feeds the soul. Brazilian liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, tells the story of a woman of great poverty who he offered sympathy to. “It must be so hard to be so poor.” And she taught him a lesson saying, “I am

not poor. For I have hope.” Hope is the stuff that salty Christians can use to preserve the world.

We are called to proclaim the good news that Christ came into the world and that our hope is found in him and him alone, not in anything of this world! Not in science, not in economics, not in politics, not in pleasure. In whatever age we find ourselves, this is always our task.

Salt’s preservative quality challenges the church to preserve that which is valuable and rare in today’s world. Social Media has created an environment in which our first instinct is to be offended and our first action is to respond with vitriol and contempt.

The church is to be the keeper and promoter of the most precious and rare virtues of respect, charitableness, and magnanimity.

The church is called to be a model for the world. How we live and relate to each other, as the Book of Order tells us, should be a provisional demonstration of the Kingdom of God itself! This means offering care and compassion to each other and it means holding one another accountable to this standard. It means reaching out especially, especially, (the Old Testament is absolutely unequivocal about this), to the stranger and the dispossessed – those disposed of their land, their home, dispossessed of their dignity and their livelihood. The Old Testament tells us to love our neighbor only twice, but to love and be generous to the stranger at least three dozen times! The Bible couldn’t paint a clearer picture than that!

No matter what policies and rules are passed, you and I must always reach out to the stranger.

Next, Jesus commands us to be the light of the world. Light is an active presence that goes forth from its source tirelessly at break neck speed, in fact at the fastest speed possible!!!! A church filled with light is a church of focused energy that breaks past its walls with tenacious passion to complete its mission, never slowing down, never giving up, and shattering all darkness through which it passes.

It is true that more lights brought together shine more light, but it is also true a single candle can dispel the darkness and expose the truth.

As you can imagine, a 23-year-old young woman who grew up on the mainline of Philadelphia experienced a rather sheltered existence. So what do you think my mother thought when, in the deep of night, after worship, she and my father exited a small church after deep in the Brazilian jungle? The grass was several feet high that they had to wade through when suddenly there was a horrendous, eerie noise reverberating and bellowing all around them! She was surrounded, the noise was coming from everywhere, but by what she had no idea. Was this some creature of the night come to devour them!? In this deep darkness they had a single, pitiful, flashlight. As she tentatively raised it up, with trembling hands, a thousand glowing eyes shown back at them. Although unnerving, this dim light revealed scores of huge, but harmless Amazon Tree Frogs! And that little bit of light was enough to help them navigate their way through.

Finding your light, to help it shine through others’ darkness, is the challenge that Jesus gives us. About a month or so ago, I had a minor tooth ache. Being somewhat of a wimp when it comes to tooth pain, I made my way straight to the dentist and my wonderful dentist took care of me right away. That reminded me of our folks that are in the Dominican Republic right now. A few years ago I went to the DR and traveled with the dentists out into the countryside. As we arrived there, hundreds of people swarmed in from the hillside – coming from who knows where. And, as they waited, we discovered that some of those people had been experiencing horrific tooth pain for years! Those dentists used their gifts to be a light in the midst of the darkness of those peoples’ pain. And, for the most part, when the people left, their pain was immediately gone.

That’s the challenge that you and I have. To figure out what our light is and to shine it in the places of darkness. Your light CAN make a

difference! In so doing, Jesus assures us something profound and awesome will take place! People will see and know the glory of God. Our actions of salt and light will actually cause people to turn to God! Jesus tells us that you and I, and all of us, are people of great, fearsome power! When we have the power of salt and light at our disposal, we have the power to change the world.

This is how Jesus did it. And he calls us to the same path. Amen.