

Beyond Our Belly-Button

Isaiah 58:5-8 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. (Isa 58:5 NRS)

Matthew 5:13-16 "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Mat 5:13 NRS)

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Read the Cotton Patch Version of the Beatitudes.

We usually see the beatitudes as an independent passage that stands alone and then there's a jump-shift to this weird thing about salt. Many of us took chemistry and we know that salt is sodium chloride and as long as it's sodium chloride it's salty. So what's this stuff about salt losing its saltiness? The allusion to salt losing its taste can throw us a curve. A lot of the salt used in ancient Palestine was from salt deposits at the edge of the Dead Sea. Those deposits also included gypsum which looks a lot like salt. Gypsum, if mistakenly used as salt, would leave one with the impression of salt that has lost its flavor. So, in that day and time, one could have the perception of salt ceasing to taste like salt.

In this passage, the word *you* is plural. Jesus said, "Y'all are the salt of the earth, but if y'all have stopped being salty, y'all are useless." Jesus was speaking to the disciples, his followers. The *you*, the y'all, the disciples, are the church today. It's as if Jesus said, "the church is cayenne pepper. You're to add zest to the life of the world. If you don't, then you're useless." Blandness isn't a Christian virtue. The Women's Circles have been studying Revelation this year and they know that the church at Laodicea was rebuked for being lukewarm and God said, "I will spit you out!" (Rev 3:16)

In addition, the Greek verb for *has lost its flavor* can also mean *has become foolish*. If the church has lost its flavor, if it is distracted by the ways of society and resembles the foolishness of the world, then it has ceased to be useful. Salt loses its saltiness by becoming so diluted that it no longer has any effect. The church can become so diluted by the world around it that it is no longer the church - and it's useless.

Jesus continued teaching, saying, "Y'all are the light of the world. Y'all let that light shine on other folks. And when they see the good work that the church does, they'll know it's God's work and they'll give thanks to God." This isn't a new teaching. Back in the book of Isaiah, the prophet brings God's message. ^{NRS} **Isaiah 42:6** I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations."

Think about light for a moment. If the light level is really dim, we don't see colors very well, but when the light is bright, colors pop out. They're vivid, and subtle hues and tones can be seen. In low light you can't see much detail. If you need to tighten the screw in your glasses, sew on a button, or read the ingredients on a vitamin pill bottle, you need bright light. Light enables us to see things as they really are. The bright light of God's will illuminates how life was created to be. In a dark world, it's a dog-eat-dog existence, but when the light shows us God's kingdom, we see that the lion and the lamb are to lie down together. In the darkness of the world, we're told that security comes by getting all you can. But the bright light of God's vision for our lives shows us that peace and harmony come through making sure that the hungry are fed and the naked are clothed.

The **real** world is God's kingdom, not the distorted and dark world that we've designed for ourselves. When you plant a garden, you need a sunny spot. You can't get corn or tomatoes to grow very well or produce much to eat if you plant them in the shade. In the same way, in God's kingdom, in the ultimate reality, the light of God's will promotes growth and bearing fruit.

This evening many of us will watch the Super Bowl game. The athletes who'll take to the field have spent many hours in training. They've worked hard in the gym. The point of that time in the gym is not so that they can spend this evening in front of a mirror making their muscles ripple and admiring their beautifully defined abs. If they don't go out and **do** something with their highly developed bodies, then they're useless as football players.

Oddly enough, Jesus is addressing the same issue here. It is absolutely critical that we devote time and energy to building a relationship with our Lord. Spiritual formation is a bit like the time an athlete spends in the gym. But, we can get lost in our personal relationship with Jesus, spending all our effort on looking inward, or "navel gazing" as some have called it. If all we do is look inward, we'll never see beyond our belly-buttons.

And we're more focused on navel-gazing than we might realize. For instance, it's pretty easy to find music that's about one's individual relationship with Jesus and about the comfort that gives us. "I come to the garden alone" we sing. "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine." Much of the focus of our music this morning is on our personal relationship with God. That's well and good. We need to spend time in the spiritual gym to grow stronger. But then we're called to look beyond our belly-buttons – and it's much harder to find hymns that are about letting our light shine before others.

The main purpose of light is not to be seen, but to allow other things to be seen. The purpose of salt is to affect other food. Both are about the effect on others, not themselves. Jesus says that religion must not be personal and private, but directed toward the good of others. Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. (Matt 6:1) Don't shine the light so that you will be seen, but shine the light so that others can see the path. If you're walking with friends at night, you don't shine the flashlight on yourself, you shine it on the ground in front of everyone so that you can all see where you're going.

In today's text Jesus isn't just pointing out that it isn't all about us personally. Remember, the *you* he speaks of in this passage is a collective *you* – a *y'all* as we would put it more clearly. That *y'all* is the disciples, the church, the body of Christ. We're called to be a body, to be together. "What a fellowship, what a joy divine," we sing. "Blest be the tie that binds. We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear." We find strength and joy in the "fellowship of kindred minds" as we eat together, watch movies together, study together, and as we get together tonight at the Byrnes' home to have a party and watch the Super Bowl game. We are a community, a family, and that's extremely important to each and every one of us.

Yet, here again, Jesus calls our attention beyond our belly-button, even when it's the belly-button of the body of Christ, the church. "You are the light of the world," Jesus declares. In that statement, Jesus reinforces the words of the prophet Isaiah centuries earlier. ^{NRS} **Isaiah 49:6** [The Lord] says, "It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." When the people of Israel were captives in Babylon, they were told that just restoring Israel wasn't enough. They were to be a light to the nations. Preserving our identity as the church isn't enough. Cloistering ourselves as a mutual support group won't get it. "William Temple¹ is often quoted as saying, "The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those that are not its members."²

Jesus taught us to let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. And what might those good works be? **Isaiah 58:6-8a** "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn."

God is praised more highly by acts of generosity to the poor and by kindness performed for enemies than by the most eloquent prayers. Actions speak louder than words. Acts of compassion and mercy praise God much more than the most exuberant praise chorus. If we're not going to be salt that has lost its usefulness, if we aren't going to be like a light that doesn't illuminate the way, then we must look beyond our individual belly-button and beyond the collective belly-button of the body of Christ. We're to live in God's kingdom here and now, on earth as it is in heaven. The church is the outpost of the heavenly kingdom.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, because the church will show them the kingdom of heaven and the body of Christ will comfort those who mourn. Those who are hungry for righteousness will be fed the bread of heaven by the disciples. Blessed are the pure in heart, because they will see God in the very acts of the church. The blessings of the Beatitudes are the salt that makes life palatable and the light that shows the way. Brothers and sisters, let us look beyond ourselves so that we may be salt and light. Amen.

"The Gospel is not intended as *halakah*, a rule for life, but to stimulate imagination and personal responsibility."³

^{NRS} **Job 6:6** Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt, or is there any flavor in the juice of mallows?

^{NRS} **Leviticus 2:13** You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt. (Lev 2:13 NRS)

^{NRS} **Numbers 18:19** All the holy offerings that the Israelites present to the LORD I have given to you, together with your sons and daughters, as a perpetual due; it is a covenant of salt forever before the LORD for you and your descendants as well.

Purification - ^{NRS} **2 Kings 2:19** Now the people of the city said to Elisha, "The location of this city is good, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful." ²⁰ He said, "Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. ²¹ Then he went to the spring of water and threw the salt into it, and said, "Thus says the LORD, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it." ²² So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke. (2Ki 2:19 NRS)

^{RSV} **Revelation 3:16** So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.

¹ William Temple was Archbishop of Canterbury 1942-1944

² Charles James Cook, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. One* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 336

³ M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew, NIB* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995) p 183