

"Let Your Light Shine"

Matthew 5:13-20

February 6, 2011

It is great to be back among you after having been gone for the last two Sundays. It is always interesting for me to reflect on the church and it's place in the world on those occasions when I am away from this place. For us the church is family. It is at the very heart of all that we do and think about. Somehow, I always imagine that that is the way it is for most people. Sunday is a day to gather with family at the church building - it is comforting and just always feels right. The week would not be the same without that gathering. In our recent travels, our situation and schedule made Sunday morning a time filled with travel and arranging to get to our destination and standing in line. I hate that it worked out that way but somehow it seemed improbably that airlines would change their schedule so that we could go to church. In those times, I missed you and I missed the rituals of what it is that we do together. Because it is so important it is easy to come to believe that the same has to be true for the rest of the world That somehow the rest of the world must stop for worship on Sundays and only after spending time in worship does the world slowly begin to turn again. Of course, what I found out was that such was not true. The world keeps turning and folks are busy doing all kinds of things without seeming to even notice that the church is gathered in worship. It just is not a part of the lives of so many people.

These things come to mind today as I think about our scriptures for this morning. In the days of the writing of both the Old Testament text and the Gospel, the situation in which the people lived made the church an interesting thing to be a part of. The TO text is set in a time shortly after the people have returned to Jerusalem after a long period of exile. Their city and their temple had been destroyed but now they were rebuilding. There was so much to do. And during the long years of exile, their normal worship practices had been impossible - perhaps even forbidden by the ruling authorities. Still, the people remembered that it had been important and returned to the practice of their religious rituals But now they were just shallow rites. The action was there but the meaning was lost. And the prophets called the people to examine what it was that they thought it meant to be the church.

The Gospel text is a part of the Sermon on the Mount. Even though Jesus preached the sermon at a time when the temple and regular worship was a part of their lives, it wasn't until much later - - perhaps as much as 50 years later that it was written down by Matthew and it was being read for the first time. At that time the church was again in turmoil. The temple had again been destroyed. There was uncertainty in the world and among the people of God. What did it mean to be an Israelite? What did it mean to be a part of God's chosen people? How do you live surrounded by the power of the Roman Empire? What did it mean to be the church?

We might hear the questions and think they are pretty foreign and have nothing to do with us. Who really cares today about what was happening all those years ago? But the reality is that they are really our questions Our situation Our confusion. The church has been a part of the American landscape for all of our lives. The rituals are familiar. It is all commonly accepted But it has quickly lost its place of authority and is seen by many as being unimportant. For so many, it just does not have a place in their lives. And we again have to ask, what does it mean to be the church?

What does it mean to be the church in a world that has forgotten about the church? What does it mean to be the church in a world where the Super Bowl drew 106 million viewers / worshipers last year and who knows how many this year? What does it mean to be the church at a time when the rituals seem to have lost their meanings?

Jesus turned to the church and said, "You are the salt of the earth You are the light of the world!" But in each case, He went on to say that if the salt isn't doing what salt is supposed to do ... It is worthless ... To be thrown out. If the light is not seen If it does not provide light to the world ... It too is worthless. And for many in our world the salt has lost its saltiness and the light does not shine. So we ask with the prophets of every generation - what does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be the children of God? Are we salt? Are we light?

There is a cute story about a little girl who went to visit her grandparents. It seems as though they held Sunday to be very sacred. They thought it should be a day of quietness, - to walk, not run in it, - to read the Bible and none other. The granddaughter could not swing nor gather the flowers that grew in the pasture. While grandpa was taking his nap, she asked for permission to walk outside. Along the pasture fence she stopped to watch the old mule, standing with his head bowed low and his eyes closed. Reaching through the fence, she pet the side of the mule and said, "Poor old fellow, have you got religion, too?"

Who are we as the people of God? If we are salt that is pretty good & zesty stuff. If we are light then we have power to shatter the darkness and help the world to see. That is exciting stuff ... and it has the power to preserve and produce life. WOW! Is that what it is to be the church? One of the really exciting things about what Jesus said about who we are to be is that not only are we salt but we are salt of the earth and we are light of the world. We are not salt in order to simply sit in the salt shaker. We are not light for under a bushel basket. We are for the world. We are to be salt & light for the sake of others. We receive that gracious gift and we have to sprinkle it around The fire burns inside us and we can not help but bring heat and light to the world.

There was an Archbishop by the name of William Temple who is quoted as having said, "The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not members." Think about that for a minute. Somehow it is easy to forget what it is that we are all about. As in the days of the prophet Isaiah and the time when Matthew was writing his account of the Gospel of Jesus Christ we have to struggle with questions concerning what it means to be the church. We get lost in the rituals and caught up in the world but God has called us to be a salty - light giving people for the world.

There is a great Peanuts cartoon that featured Peppermint Patty talking to Charlie Brown. She said, "Guess what, Chuck. The first day of school and I got sent to the principal's office. It was your fault, Chuck." He said, "My fault? How could it be my fault? Why do you say everything is my fault?" She said, "You're my friend, aren't you, Chuck? You should have been a better influence on me." We are the church we are light and salt that reaches into the life of the world.

I read an article this past week in which a pastor talked about the church having become too safe. His thought was that the church has to become dangerous. And why not - we are called to light up the world. The light of Christ comes to fill the void of darkness. What a glorious and life giving gift that we have received. — Let it shine. Let it flash in the eyes of all of those you encounter.

AMEN