

Sunday February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
5<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany

**PRAYER:** Eternal Spirit, Creator of all places and peoples, we come together in the name of the Christ. In him you became one with us, that we might become one with one another in the worship of you. Amen.

**PRAYER OF CONFESSION:** The path that you choose for us, O God, is: to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share our bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into our houses, to cover the naked, and not to hide ourselves from our own kin. Break forth the light of dawn to dispel our darkness when we disobey you and let the glory of the Lord shine through when we do. For then when we cry for help you shall answer and say, "Here I am."

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** "If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted...the Lord will guide you continually...so that you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail...Take delight in the Lord and God will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; God will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

**STEWARDSHIP:** From Paul's second letter to the Corinthians chapter 8, verse 9 we read, "You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich."

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Gracious and Loving God, we thank you for the light that shone in Jesus, revealing unto us your holiness and lack of righteousness. We deplore this monumental gap, yet we rejoice that you came to chase away the darkness that kept your holiness hidden from our eyes. By your light we are both encouraged and condemned. We are reassured to see your face turned in our direction, calling us to yourself. But we shudder at the sight of our turning our backs on you, resisting the light that could transform us.

We thank you, O God, for leaving your light in the world even though we have not always heeded your summons to become the light of the world. Instead of illuminating your character, we have blurred it. You have commanded us to love you with all our being, but we have consigned our love to the pigeonhole of religion. You have commanded us to love our neighbours as ourselves, but we have been too preoccupied with ourselves to find them. You have called us to be peacemakers, yet we have encouraged arms makers with our fears and our money. You have summoned us to be wall breakers, yet we have supported the wall makers with our silence and our sympathy. We have seen the light, but we have refused to walk in it.

Yet we do hunger for your righteousness, O God. We thirst for your law and to do your will. We humbly and with contrite hearts ask forgiveness for our rebellion, not merely for the sake of the joy we have denied others. Keep ever before us the needs of the world into which you sent Jesus and for whose sake he gave himself completely. Let us feel his sacrifice as if it were our own, and be inspired to carry on his work of transformation in the name and spirit of Christ who came into this world not to condemn it but to save it. —the violence in Quebec City

We listen now, O God, for your world. Let its message illumine our minds that we may will as Jesus willed. Let its power speed our steps that we may do as Jesus did.

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Matthew 5:13-20

“What Governs Me?”

One of the things that truly amuse me, are little tidbits of movie trivia about famous movies. I particularly enjoy learning about mistakes the producers or director of the film make and editors missed. For example: Edward G. Robinson’s character gets sent to the famous Alcatraz prison in 1927, during the movie *The Last Gangster*. What’s wrong with that? Well, Alcatraz didn’t become a prison until 1934.

In the 1959 movie, *Anatomy of a Murder*, Lee Remick is seen sitting in a café wearing a dress. She leaves that same café wearing pants. In the final shot of the John Wayne Vietnam movie, *Green Berets*, the sun actually sets in the east. In the film *Emma Hamilton* set in the year 1804, Big Ben is heard to strike. That’s odd, since Big Ben wasn’t built for another 50 years. For one of the most famous gaffs in film; look carefully at the chariot racers in *Ben Hur* and you will see them wearing wristwatches.

Want to hear more gaffs? There are no prizes for geography in the 1968 movie *Krakatoa, East of Java*. Krakatoa was actually 200 miles west of Java. In the movie *The Prisoner of Zenda* you can see two Volkswagen Beetles, even though the film is set in the nineteenth century. In the film, *The Desk Set*, Katherine Hepburn leaves her office carrying a bunch of white flowers but by the time she reaches the street they are pink.

It also happens on television. On an episode of the popular BBC’s *Antiques Road Show*, expert Arthur Negus actually dropped someone’s prized clock, shattering it into a hundred pieces. On another occasion, at the conclusion of an interview with the pop group Duran Duran, Paula Yates discovered that she had been sitting on the microphone the whole time and nobody heard a word of the interview.

Then finally there is this whopper of a mistake created by three employees of Kiss 103.3 FM, a radio station in Boise Idaho, who had the bright idea of telling a group of teenage boy callers that they could win an undisclosed sum of money, by dialing an 800 number and then saying: “The phrase that pays: ‘I’m going to kill the President.’”

What they didn’t tell these boys was that the number they had been asked to call was that of the White House, as a result of which Secret Service agents stormed the boys’ house while they were still on the line. When the Secret Service went to the radio station, the three employees behind the ill-advised prank had to listen to a phrase that definitely will not pay: “You’re fired.” (The Giant Bathroom Book of Dumbology, G. Tibballs.)

May I state the obvious this morning? People, all people without exception, make mistakes. Sometimes the mistakes are: unintentional and harmless and can be quite amusing, like those mistakes in movies. Other mistakes can be undertaken with some intention, only to turn out disastrously, like with that radio prank.

Whatever the cause: an oversight, error in judgment, faulty information, best of intentions or some other reason, we all make mistakes.

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I would even go so far as to say that if you believe you have lived a mistake free life, you are either delusional or lying to yourself. And all I have to do to prove you do make mistakes is ask one of your family members, who would probably be more than happy to give us ample examples of your folly. In fact, a lot of us will make some kind of mistake today and may have already. Stuff happens. Mistakes are a part of life.

That being acknowledged, however, doesn't free us from an obligation to lessen the impact of our mistakes. If we have made a mistake, we should: own up to it, ask forgiveness, make amends, and try not to repeat the same mistake over again. If the mistake harms no one, but embarrasses us a bit, like a poor choice in a hair style; maybe we have to learn to laugh at our folly, and not take the small things in life so seriously.

“No use crying over spilled milk”, as we like to say. As followers of Christ, we have a strong motivation for trying to avoid mistakes. If we are sincere in our faith, we will seek to follow Christ's example, and with his help try to get things right. When I say get things right, I am of course not talking about television shows, movie productions or math tests; but rather I am referring to our relationships with each other and with God.

In all honesty, we know that this admirable ambition of living for Jesus is always a work in progress. We are always finding new ways to follow him more closely, and new ways to strengthen our bonds with him. There is some serious truth to an expression that was popular when I was a teen, and appeared on posters in thousands of youth classes in churches all over North America. “God is not finished with me yet.” We are being: refined, polished, and shaped constantly by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, it falls upon us all, to examine our lives through the lens of Christ and the scriptures. On that thought, one of the passages we maybe most familiar with in our pursuit of following Christ, is our Gospel lesson today, where Jesus identifies us as being salt and light. As I was reflecting on this passage, I realized how often Jesus' intention in this passage has been misunderstood. If I took a poll this morning, after we read this passage, I wonder what the reaction was from most people here today.

I cannot know for sure, but I bet that if we meditated on this passage long enough, at some point we might feel some guilt. We might feel some profound sadness at how we have let Jesus down. To be honest, that is how this passage is often used by preachers. They might say something like, “Come on people! You are not being salt. Your light is hidden under bushels. Let's pull up our socks for Jesus.”

Have you ever felt this way, or maybe feel this way now about this passage? I must be getting cynical as I get older, but every time I hear scripture used by a speaker to make people feel guilty, other than perhaps about their own sin, I get upset. The Jesus I meet in the bible saved his harshest words and attitude, not for average people struggling with life, but for “religious experts”.

Are you not weary about having sad thoughts about how you let Jesus down? This feeling of guilt is ingrained in us from a very young age.

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We teach our children to sing. “Jesus loves me when I’m bad but it makes him very sad.” I mean, when you are all of five or six years old, who wants to make Jesus sad. I remember an image created in my mind of Jesus shedding great gobs of tears because I teased my sister. Is that what Jesus wants? First of all I must state the obvious, because sometimes we forget even the obvious.

Jesus is not naive. As the hymn writer states, “Jesus knows our every weakness.” We cannot surprise him, no matter how sophisticated our schemes may be. However, how we think of Jesus is crucial to our overall spiritual health. In Romans chapter 8 the Apostle Paul talks at length about our proper attitude to our status before God. He writes, “So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God’s very own children, adopted into his family-calling him Father.”

What may surprise you, and relieve you to know, is that this passage before us today is not about making us feel bad, but rather about reaching our full potential and achieving abundant living. Let me see if I can unpack this a little bit to show you what I mean. Why does Jesus call us salt? Think about that; of all the chemicals out there in the universe, why salt? Why not plutonium, zinc or even hydrogen?

Why does he think of us as Sodium Chloride? Our immediate response might be for us to dialogue about how important salt was in the Middle East in Jesus’ day, or even in our day. Salt, as we know, is quite plentiful in our world. In fact, today one of our greatest health concerns confronting us is that we use too much salt; in everything from processed foods, to even spreading copious amounts of it on our road ways.

So it’s no wonder that I have heard sermons and admittedly, even delivered some myself, about the many uses of salt; both in the ancient world and now. We can talk about how salt was used to preserve, and season food. Particularly, how salt was used to preserve meat without refrigeration. Then, as I have done in the past, I can take these uses of salt and apply that to our lives for some life principles. It does sound reasonable.

The problem, though, is that Jesus’ focus in using the illustration of salt was quite narrow, and we read too much into the passage by bringing all these other uses for salt into the picture. Now, of all the uses for salt which we can think of, which one does Jesus mention? He only mentions one. He doesn’t talk about salt as a preservative, or that it causes hypertension.

He doesn’t suggest that it can be used to melt ice. Jesus talks about salt in this passage, as doing one thing and one thing only; flavoring food. Pursue Jesus’ thought a bit more, and we read that he considers his followers to be, the flavouring agent of the world. It’s a simple illustration, Jesus employs here. We all understand how salt acts as a flavouring agent. All of us have tried, at some point, a soup, or stew, or some other food and exclaimed that there is not enough salt.

What we mean by this judgment is that the food is bland. Even things we think are meant to be only sweet, like cookies or cakes, need a pinch of salt.

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Without salt, we might prefer to pass on the dish being offered. Hospital food, for example, is notorious for being bland, because they remove most of the salt. Jesus is saying that we are meant to be the flavour of this world. We are to make life better for everyone. He is saying that we all have the potential to walk into any situation in this world: and flavour it, make it better, or more palatable.

And it's not about quantity here, where more is better; but more importantly about presence. It is about God's people getting mixed into the concoctions of work, neighbourhoods, schools and anywhere else we find ourselves. It is really quite simple to understand. Ask yourself a question; are situations, places, and relationships better because we are a part of them? It is really all about making a difference.

Not just by words and actions, but more importantly by our presence. The same point is being made when Jesus talks about our being lights. What do lights do, but erase darkness and guide people to hope; like a city on a hill? You see, our potential to make a difference is not linked to grandiose plans, but to our presence. Why, because we are the body of Christ and where we go, he goes.

The incarnation of God in Christ, didn't end with Jesus' ascension to heaven, but it continues in you and me. We so easily beat ourselves up over misunderstanding the value of our just being present. How often do we feel helpless and unsure of what to do, when people we know and love, are experiencing tragedy? How often have we said, "I just don't know what to say or do? I don't know what's appropriate."

In Jesus' words, it's not complicated. Salt is a very simple thing, but it makes a huge difference. In hospital rooms, funeral homes, quiet gatherings at work or school, when all seems lost, we enter as people of hope. In the face of disaster, Christ's people show fortitude and strength that non-believers cannot understand. Like how in that terrible typhoon in the Philippines, believers can gather in ruined churches, to sing hymns of praise and thanksgiving.

You see, it's not about what we do, but rather who we are. The good deeds that bring praise to God, spring from our nature as salt. Jesus is saying that he wants us to see the power, and the potential we possess to change this world; to change the bland nature of life to something savory. Christ's followers are to make life "tasty" for others. Our worthlessness as salt, that Jesus talks about is not about failing to do things.

It is a failure to be who we are meant to be. We are not to hide who we are, but rather make our faith so obvious through our love, hope, and peace; that people can't help but be drawn to us and in turn Christ. Being the salt of the world, in most cases, probably also means being subtle. It means you are present, making a difference, without most people even being aware of the influence and power you possess.

*Tony Campolo tells a wonderful story about a friend of his that had joined an AIDS support group made up of people who had family members dying of this dreaded disease.*

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*People who came together to find in community the emotional support that would enable them endure what confronted them.*

*One woman in the group was especially negative toward the church and pointed out that she didn't go to church anymore because the people in her congregation were so condemning of her son and so judgmental of her for raising a boy who turned out to be gay. It would be fair to say that she had reached the point at which she hated the church.*

*In the course of her tirades, she happened to mention that the only person who had ever given her any help was an elderly man who had recently moved in next door to her. "Every morning," she said, "he comes over and has coffee with me and listens to me unburden myself. He holds my hand and comforts me as I cry. If it wasn't for him, I don't know what I would do. Why can't church people be like that?"*

*What the woman didn't know was that the man was a retired Presbyterian minister. He didn't tell her about his previous vocation because he knew that, more than anything else; she needed a friend who would listen. He knew that if she was aware that he was a clergyman, there might be a barrier to the love he could give. Telling her about his past life would come in due time. For the present, a shoulder to cry on was most important. (Tony Campolo, Let Me Tell You a Story-pg. 157)*

A pinch of salt makes a huge difference. A single lit candle makes a big difference. It's not quantity that matters, but that we are there as part of the mix. If you want to live a bland life, it is really quite easy. Just ignore the fact that Christ has declared you to be salt and light. To keep life bland for others, stay out of hospitals, schools, nursing homes, work places and anywhere else people are.

To leave people wandering in darkness, don't talk about the hope you have, or the peace you enjoy, or where you get your love. Life will go on, but it will be far from flavourful or abundant. Are we ready to embrace what we are? I hope so, because the world is screaming for somebody to pass the salt.

**BENEDICTION:** You have called us, O God, to embrace the mission of Jesus as our own. Our sight is not equal to this vision, and our strength is not equal to this task. But you, O Lord, are a merciful God. You give light to those who walk in darkness, and you grant strength to those who carry heavy loads. As we return to the workaday world, let us see your light before us and feel your strength within us.