

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany Year A: 8 / 9 February 2020
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Kathy Major

“One light. A dash of salt. One person can make all the difference. We will each have times when we’re the first light, the first ray of hope. And we will each have times when we need someone else to provide the first light, the first thawing, so that we can get our bearings.”

Isaiah 58: 1-9a
1 Corinthians 2: 2-12
Matthew 5: 13-20
Psalm 112: 1-9

We are living through some extraordinary times in our nation. Last week we saw the conclusion of only the third Impeachment trial of a sitting president. Extraordinary. I don't really care how you feel about the trial, whether you're a republican, democrat, or independent voter. I'm not concerned with where you fall out in any of the politics of the moment. But Mitt Romney's speech at the Senate vote highlights this week's gospel imperative to be 'salt' and 'light.' Keep him in mind as we talk about this week's readings.

Jesus is giving his 'Sermon on the Mount' in this week's gospel lesson – and while it continues through chapter seven of Matthew, we're only going to get through chapter five before Lent begins. His sermon is about how his disciples are supposed to live out our faith, how we can best carry out his work the world.

Jesus says that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Salt and light. These attributes, salt and light, reflect our lives when we're on the right track, doing the right things, loving God and loving our neighbors, fulfilling God's Law.

Salt is a preservative (also great at thawing ice and snow) and a great enhancer of taste. I live in Syracuse and our area used to be a source of salt for the nation – it was the main source of salt in the US during the 19th century. Salt was mined to the south of Onondaga Lake (in a town that came to be called Salina, of course.) Syracuse is also known as 'Salt City.'

If you've ever had to cut down on your salt intake, you know what a difference salt can make in food. Salt not only works as a preservative, it enhances the way food tastes. Jesus says that we are the salt of the earth. What does that mean? In what way are we like salt?

Any time we work to make the world a safer place, to preserve the world's people or resources; we're like salt. Any time we work to enhance the world, to bring joy or beauty or hope; we're like salt. Any time we speak the truth, even when inconvenient or uncomfortable; we're like savory salt. Any time we stand up for justice, even when we stand alone and we know it won't make any difference in the outcome; we're like salt.

And we are the light of the world – but we know that because we always talk about light throughout Epiphany. Jesus is the light of the world; we carry the Christ-light within us. Yes, yes, we know. We are the light of the world.

And we remember: One candle can light up a darkened room. One person can make a difference. If you think that's not true, think back to Mitt Romney's choice to vote across party lines and with his conscience – one vote, bringing back hope that there CAN be bipartisan decisions on important topics. One vote bringing back hope that there are politicians who struggle to do what is right and in line with their beliefs.

Jesus told his listeners that unless their righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees they'd never enter the kingdom of heaven. I'm not sure that his original hearers were quite aware of the irony of his words. I'm not sure we are quite aware, either, hearing him down these centuries...

The scribes and Pharisees were the 'good church people' of the 1st century. They spoke a very righteous game. They apparently followed all the laws of the Torah, including the laws that surrounded the law of the Torah. Later in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus will condemn the scribes and Pharisees for being 'white washed tombs, full of dead men's bones' because while they talked righteously, their lives did not match their words. It's one thing to say that you love God and your neighbor. Jesus says we need to be better than that. Jesus says we have to DO what we TEACH. Our walk must match our talk.

That's where I found Mitt Romney's words so encouraging. He was in a difficult place, struggling to match his walk with his talk. I respect that. It would have been so much easier for him to do what others expected of him and to keep his true feelings to himself.

Don't we all have moments when it's just so much easier to go with the flow, to not disturb the peace, to keep our true feelings quiet, even when we know what we're seeing or hearing is less than loving, or just, or true.

The world needs hope. The world needs to know that the destruction and war and poverty and criminal activity and petty meanness we see all around us is not the final word. The world needs to know that God is present in all of our troubles, no matter what those troubles are, no matter how much we deserve or do not deserve them. The world needs to know that love is the final word.

We need to join the struggle, need to take care that our words and actions reflect God's love and justice and truth. We need to be salt, to melt icy hearts and clear a path with our words and actions of love and kindness. We need to be light, to show what is true and what is not, to bring as much clarity and justice and mercy as we can.

One light. A dash of salt. One person can make all the difference. We will each have times when we're the first light, the first ray of hope. And we will each have times when we need someone else to provide the first light, the first thawing, so that we can get our bearings.

One light makes all the difference. One ray of hope shining into the darkness makes it just that much easier to find our way through. Many lights, shining into the darkness, can make the problems seem small.

We are not perfect. God knows. We don't have all the answers. We struggle to do what we teach. But. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. With the Spirit's help, let's get back to work. Amen.