

SALT AND LIGHT

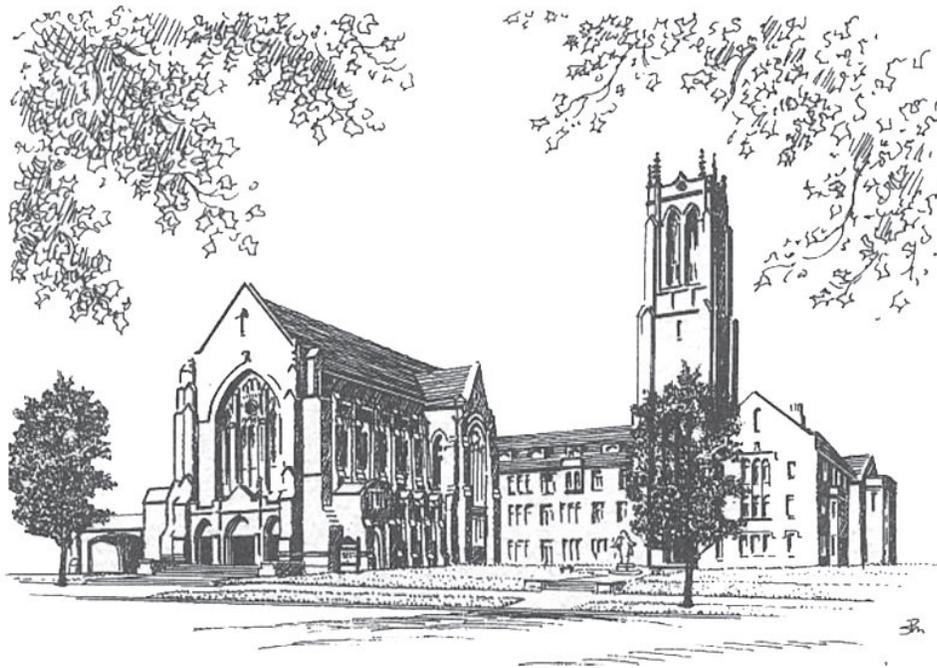
by

Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

February 5, 2017

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts: Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12) • Psalm 112:1-10 • 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16) • Matthew 5:13-20

Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12)

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?

“Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

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?

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?

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?

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. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Psalm 112

Praise the Lord! Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments.

Their descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.

Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever.

They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.

It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice.

For the righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever.

They are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.

Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.

They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their horn is exalted in honor.

The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16)

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" — these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within?

So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

"For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?"

But we have the mind of Christ.

Matthew 5:13-20

“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.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 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.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

He had to do something very hard. He was a custodian all his life in a local university campus. He was paid minimally upon which he supported a wife and eight children. The environment at work was not always bright. His life was difficult. He rose early each work day morning before dawn and arrived home just in time to say good night to his children.

On those early dark mornings before leaving, his wife would say to him, “I know it’s hard. Go and be the light.”

In 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for buses in Montgomery, Alabama, to be segregated. The boycott begun by a young minister, Martin Luther King Jr., was ended.

For first time, get on bus and sit in any available seat.

Dr. King knew that those who go onto those newly integrated buses could face anger or violence. Knew they could be walking into hatred. Told them that walking into darkness of hatred, they had one option: **be the light**.

King typed a one-page set of instructions for blacks about to board the buses. Faded copy still exists: “Demonstrate calm dignity in all actions, in all things show forth courtesy and good behavior, be loving enough to absorb all evil, be understanding enough to turn an enemy into a friend, if cursed don’t curse back, if struck do not strike back. Pray for your oppressor and use spiritual force to carry on the work of justice.”

That’s what he said, and that’s what they did.

King asked them to do something very hard.

And make no mistake. What Jesus is asking us to do in the Gospel today is hard.

This “being the light” doesn’t only apply to large movements or famous people. This sermon from Jesus is to all!

You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.

Jesus is asking us to do something very hard. In a world full of so much darkness, you are the light of the world — and we are not allowed to hide it.

“A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket but on a lampstand.”

As one preacher said: Putting a lamp under a bushel certainly reduces the chance of having it blown out, but the price for such protection is darkness. In other words, the way of Christ is mission: The way of Christ is to take the initiative and, rather than hide from the world, let the light shine in the hopeful trust that the praise of God will be increased.

Notice that Jesus said, “You *are*,” not “You *ought to be* or should *try to be*.”

In a dark world, you *are* the light; I’m sending you into that darkness, harshness, unjustness, you be the light in that... So that people see the good you do and give glory to God. Be the light.

In a world filled with darkness, anger, fear, and distrust. The Christian calling is to be the light — wherever that is — in your family, in your work, on your errands, in your business, in your finances, in your decisions, in your relationships, in all of our lives. You are the light so that people will see and know that there is a God of goodness and light.

Now light does many things. It reveals, exposes, it brightens.

Salt also does many things. It preserves and adds flavor. But salt doesn't stand alone; it only makes sense when added with others. It doesn't exist for its own sake. We are salt of the earth to show the beauty of God, and we must follow God in community.

Many of us sang that song as children — “This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine.” I loved it.

When I was a child I didn't know what that would cost, not aware of some of the darkness where we will have to work hard at bringing light. The hard, difficult daily vocation of being light in our family, on campus, at work, even when we wonder if we can possibly make a difference.

Many will go looking for an easier guru than Jesus. You can search the internet and find someone or some teaching that promises you everything and asks of you nothing. But if you want transformation, the alternative way of the Gospel is to take up cross, walk into bus, show light in your whole life, follow Jesus.

Jesus' way as we see here is ramped up from the Pharisees. We often see Jesus in contrast to the Pharisees, but here Jesus seeks more from us than just rule following. Jesus seeks from us our whole lives and all of our loyalties.

“Jesus' listeners, living in the context of Roman domination, would probably have known that Rome saw itself as a ‘light to the world.’”

So for Jesus to say no, **you** are the light of the world, was a proclamation of defiance.

The first shining city on the hill was Jesus Christ and Jesus' followers.

Every now and again, for us to be the light of Christ means we are a contrast to the prevailing culture, we are a contrast to the government, we are a peculiar to

our best friends or co-workers. Light and salt living is a peculiar way. This whole Sermon on the Mount is casting a vision for human community and Christian community that is peculiar — peacemakers, blessed are poor in spirit, those that mourn, those that are persecuted are blessed, salt and light to the world?

Jesus' profound and simple teaching is this today: you are the light of the world — not Rome — you are salt of the earth — not the government.

C.S. Lewis said once, "I believe in the Christian faith as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else."

Through the lens of faith we see all of life — relationships, public policy, our work, our decisions whatever it may be.

We transform the world by being beautiful that points to, gives glory to a good and beautiful God.

It was Richard Rohr again who said, "The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better. Oppositional energy only creates more of the same."

We might say, the best criticism of darkness is the practice of light.

The best counter to darkness is light — not more darkness, more fear, more anxiety, more harshness.

The best counter to ugliness isn't more of the same, but from the opposite perspective; the best counter to it is salt, flavor, beauty.

The aim of being salt and light in the world is to preserve the creation, to add beauty, to provide the contrast to darkness such that the reality itself is transformed.

Movements of change and transformation that bring light are important for a time, but they aren't the end goal. Movements of change don't exist for themselves, just like being salt and light don't make sense on their own. They exist to show good works that give glory to God.

In the book *Howard's End*, E.M. Forster wrote, "*Because a thing is going strong now, it need not go strong forever,*" there is something of a "craze for motion." *It may be followed by a civilization that won't be a movement, because it will rest upon the earth.*"

The Christian life ultimately moves toward a moment when light will be the fullness of what is and all will be preserved and well, when the city on the hill, the kingdom of God is synonymous with kingdom of earth.

Over in John 8, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” It is good to remember that ultimately none of this light depends or comes or originates in us but in Christ.

You are...the light of the world.

You are...the salt of the earth.

This is grace. Jesus has granted us this place before we have even done anything.

Stained-glass windows — that’s our vocation (without sun, no light through them) — we are these windows.

A while back someone asked the preacher and writer Eugene Peterson what he would say if he were writing what he knew would be his very last sermon. Peterson replied, “I think I would want to talk about things that are immediate and ordinary.”

In my last sermon, I guess I’d want to say, ‘Go home and be good to your spouse. Treat your children with respect. Do a good job at work.’”

And this ultimately is the primary way to be salt and light in the world. In the immediate and ordinary. Every day, every week, we can start there.