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Epiphany 5 A –Feb. 5, 2023

“The Second Lesson”

Read: Matthew 5: 13 - 20/ Memorize: Matthew 5: 13a; 14a.

We’re back again on the hillside; Jesus is talking. In a sense, the beatitudes have been the first lesson, addressed to the disciples, but also to the crowd. Now, in this second lesson, Jesus seems to be talking more directly to His disciples.

We might notice that the mood changes a bit as Jesus directly addresses them, “You are the salt of the earth; if the salt has lost its taste how shall its saltiness be restored?” That saying has been repeated in many places, at many times. Many of us know people we would describe as the “salt of the earth.” Perhaps you have had an experience like this teacher who went on vacation in Mexico.

The charter plane was about to take off from the airport in Acapulco when a young man dashed up to the gate counter, explaining he was supposed to be on that plane. He shouted at the reservation agent: “I’ve got reservations on that plane and my bags are on it and there isn’t another plane I can take. It’s a disaster for me, if I don’t get on that plane. Can’t you contact them and let them know I’m here? I was here two hours before the flight. I just ducked into the gift shop. They must have called the flight then.”

“Senor,” answered the man at the gate, “I am sorry but we have no communications with the captain and we cannot stop the flight.” Five minutes later the plane left and Steve Parenteau, an American junior high school counselor, remained in Acapulco with no baggage, not much money and the information that another flight would leave in three or four days. It would cost him \$800 to take that flight.

For four hours Enrique Magana, the gate attendant contacted all the agencies, who – “by the book” –were supposed to help in such situations, but to no avail. The American was out of luck. He wondered where he was to stay. “The only place I can think of,” Enrique said, “is my home.”

For a week, the young counselor from the Minneapolis suburb of Medina, lived in the modest home of the Mexican airport worker and his family. He ate at their table, played chess with Enrique and read books and played with the kids while their mother earned \$5 a day as a school teacher. He even “drank the water.” Asked, when he got home, how he accounted for the airport worker’s act, Steve said, “Some people make a commandment out of manuals and protocol. Others try kindness.” To Steve, Enrique was surely, “the salt of the earth.”

We should not be surprised by this. Enrique’s actions were exactly what Jesus expects of His disciples. He even told them that they were “the salt of the earth.” They could give life the special quality that makes it worth living, not only by their works of love, mercy and kindness, but by being what Christians are meant to be. By doing so they would be communicating the good news to all the people they met.

Jesus helps them understand what that witness would look like when He calls them “the light of the world.” The disciples’ faith in Jesus, and His Word, was to be a beacon, guiding the lost to safety. The light could not be hidden any more than a city on a hilltop could be.

To keep them mindful of that, Jesus said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they might see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” What do you think about when you hear those words? They are wonderful words to be spoken, unfortunately they’re easier said than done.

Our “lights” can grow dim and sometimes, even go out. Sometimes, the problem is that the connection to the power source is broken by our negligence and spiritual failures, more commonly called, sin. I can think of many times when pastor’s, both little known, who just served and well known, who made wonderful headlines about the good works they were doing, who found themselves falling because of moral sins.

What had happened? The problem is fallen people disconnect from the power source of Jesus. Often times, they connect to themselves. Because they were not wired into the true power of Jesus through Word and Sacrament and the Holy Spirit, it fizzled out. We all know that it happens because we also can disconnect from the source at times.

As “the light to the world” we can’t simply shine by ourselves, we need to be joined to others. That’s why God joins us together as the Body of Christ, but even that is not enough. It is not our brilliance that illuminates the world. We are meant to be the reflection of Jesus into the world. Like the moon, we reflect the light of the Son, shining upon us.

Jesus was the first “light of the world.” If we are to reflect Jesus’ light, we have to make sure we’re connected to Him as the power source. We need to recharge ourselves just as we’ve seen those flashlights that plug into outlets so that their batteries are charged, so that when there is a problem and the darkness seems to be overcoming things, we can grab it to overcome that darkness.

The dilemma is, if you’re like me, you forget to plug it in and in that time of need, it is not there. You cannot be, any more than could the disciples be, “the light of the world” by ourselves. **We need to be connected to Jesus daily so that when we shine, people will see Jesus through us.**

Jesus also made it clear to them that their lifestyles could either enhance their light or distract it from the eyes of people they met and to whom they preached. There’s often a misunderstanding about Christian freedom. **Some Christians think that Christian freedom means they can do anything they want, which is not true.**

Jesus tried to make that very clear to His disciples in His sermon. He said to them, “don’t think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.” We know what that means. In obedience to His Father, in obedience to the perfect law of God, it cost Him His life on a cross, giving a new meaning to what He was teaching. Those who flaunt God’s law are definitely treading dangerously. Sooner or later, they often pay the price.

There was a man who was taken in by situational ethics. He liked to talk about Christian freedom as a divine mandate to do anything, in his case, particularly extramarital relationships. He believed that his Christian freedom gave him that right.

A lot of people thought he was just trying to be provocative until he got involved with a woman and the news got back to his wife and family. He paid a bitter price for that one time infidelity.

After he was forgiven, he did come to realize that freedom from the law means Christians have been delivered from fulfilling the law to gain their salvation. Only Jesus could do that. Freedom from the law does not mean Christians are free to live as they please.

Jesus calls us to a radically different lifestyle than those who are not Christians. He wants people to see, by our words and deeds, that we are His followers. Sometimes, that's a difficult thing to discern.

So what did Jesus want them to be that would look so different from the rest of the people? He told them that they were to be reconcilers, bringing people together, not separating and dividing them. They were to be envisioned by God and made real in Jesus Christ in His body, the Church. They are to be peacemakers, seeking to keep the peace, not by giving in to every desire of others but, rather by seeking the truth that Jesus proclaims.

What is often interesting is that when we speak that truth, in the midst of God-fearing people, we often find that they are not as far apart as they think, when they remember that Jesus talks about maintaining the bond of unity in peace. It is the key to reconciliation of people and integral to the ministry of God's people, who would preach, teach and effectively communicate the Gospel to the world.

On second thought, it may be that these different sayings of Jesus not only hang together, but are integral to each other and vital to our ministries today. He made us "the salt of the earth," and "the light of the world," and has gained freedom from the fulfillment of the law for us by His perfect sacrifice, thereby reconciling us to God and to each other.

If you think about it that way, that's the heart of ministry. What do you think Jesus wants us to do with them? Yes, I think you're right. He wants us to get on with it. There is lots of ministry to do. God wants everyone to know Jesus and be with Him. He's given us that mission. We call it, "Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!" That's what every day disciples do, in obedience to God's command.

Count me in: With whom will you share your "salt" and "light?"