

Epiphany 5 - Year A

Today's gospel is part of Matthew's great Sermon on the Mount. That is important, because in the passage we just heard, Jesus is addressing not just his close disciples. No, in the words of our own dear Bishop, Jesus is addressing "y'all". It's a plural you – not an individual. Jesus is talking to the folks he has just spoken of in the beatitudes when he called them blessed: The poor, those who are mourning, those being persecuted. And immediately after the last "Beatitude," Jesus continues with "Y'all are the salt of the earth!" *All y'all. You are the light of the world!*"

And Jesus is also having a little fun with people when he says those things, I think. What if salt loses its taste? - Have you ever known salt to lose its taste? It is not, in fact, possible for sodium chloride to lose its saltiness. The only way salt could lose its "saltiness" is if it somehow lost its chemical composition – if it *stops being what it is*. So hear this: You *are* the salt of the earth – meant to bring out the flavor, the *life* all around you. You cannot be otherwise and still *be* who you are! Jesus says this to the outcasts of his day, the *anawim*, the poor who are being exploited and abused. And he says it to us.

But he goes on: "You are the light of the world!" - The "light" folks used in those days was an open flame. So picture this great crowd of people gathered on that mountainside – hearing Jesus call them the light of the world. The absurdity of trying to hide such a light, an open flame, under a bushel basket would make people laugh. It cannot be done! The open flame would simply set into flame the basket! No, Jesus says – your light is not meant for destruction, but to *give* light to the whole house, to give light to all those around you.

In the passage we have from Isaiah this morning, one we often hear on Ash Wednesday, God is telling us what it will take for us to be that light for the world:

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,

In other words – when we live out who we are created to be – when we live out of the values of God – THEN our light will shine. That is precisely HOW our light will shine. In the darkness of poverty, and alienation, divisiveness and bigotry of all kinds, we are charged with being light – with letting our light, the light of Christ, the light of the values of God, shine.

Catholic priest Michael Renninger, pastor of a large church in Richmond, Virginia, in his homily about this Gospel three years ago, brought this to my attention: In November 1956, the Supreme Court outlawed segregation on the buses in Montgomery, Alabama. As MLK announced the end of the bus boycott that had brought about this change, he knew that the first black folks who got on those buses might face all sorts of anger and resistance, maybe even physical violence. They might be, in other words, stepping into the very heart of racial hatred. And so he told them in a little-known document that if they were walking into the darkness of racial hatred, they had one option: to be the light. He issued a one-page set of instructions for the African Americans boarding those now-desegregated buses, a copy of which survives. Among the suggestions was this: *“Be loving enough to absorb evil and understanding enough to turn an enemy into a friend.”* In other words, meet hatred with love. Be the light.

Be the *Light!* When you walk into the darkness of contentiousness, or retribution, of people badmouthing others because their opinion disagrees with someone else, or the darkness of the despair many people are feeling at the evil that seems to be so pervasive in our world at this time – *be the Light!* When you walk into the darkness of what you know are unethical practices in business or education, *be the Light!* Go ahead and walk bravely into the darkness of another who is feeling alienated or disconnected, of someone who is sick, and *be the Light!* Just be the light. Wherever you find yourself, be light.

Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that what he was asking those bus riders to do was hard – that it would require a strength beyond that of most of us to “*Be loving enough to absorb evil and understanding enough to turn an enemy into a friend.*” He told them to pray for guidance, to get on the bus with a friend if they could, so they could “uphold one another by a glance or a prayer.” He told them to “use moral and spiritual force to carry on the struggle for justice.” I said last week that *we* come to *this* space – to be with one another – to be in community with one another. We come to share the Christ light, and to be Simeon and Anna for one another, acknowledging the Light that we are each of us – to one another and to the world. We do not always have the strength to carry our light alone. But we can *uphold* one another.

We sang in our opening hymn – “For the love of God is wider than the measure of the mind. If our love were but more faithful, we should take him at his word...”

God’s word is this: If we let the oppressed go free, break every yoke, share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into our house; clothe the naked, and *when we do not hide ourselves from one another, THEN our light shall break forth like the dawn. Our light will shine.*

Yesterday the Rev. Dr. Bonnie Perry was consecrated as the new Bishop of the Diocese of Michigan. Fellow bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows from Indianapolis gave the homily – and the homily and most of the consecration ceremony is available in a video on the Diocese of Michigan website. Bishop Jennifer was describing the work of the gospel that Bonnie has done – for racial justice, LGBTQ rights, protesting against violence. She was describing, in other words, how the bishop-to-be had found the grace to live the imperative given us in those words from Isaiah, which become the *Gospel* imperative. Bishop Jennifer said that Bonnie gets things done with the core practices of our faith – with prayer, scripture, and – preferably over a cup of hot tea - *taking the time to really get to know each other...*

We need to take time just to be with one another – in the world at large – and in this community of faith where we look for the strength to be light in darkness. Especially in this time of transition, we need to get to know one another. I am told that was one of the real gifts of the focus groups held to discuss the parish survey results – people who did not really know each other well coming together and *listening* to one another. As God spoke through Isaiah, “*When we do not hide ourselves from one another, THEN our light shall break forth like the dawn. Our light will shine.*”

We are still a couple weeks away from Lent, but that gives us time to think about how we want to spend that season. This year we will have opportunities to gather together and just spend time together – over soup and bread, or a cup of hot tea. We may share our own stories, or talk about what moves us, or simply be present to others to hear *their* stories. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., we will *uphold* one another. I encourage you to make those gatherings part of your Lenten practice this year.

We will sing, as we leave church this day, these words: “Let none hear you saying “there is nothing I can do” while the souls of some are dying and the Master calls for you. Take the task He gives you gladly...answer quickly, “Here am I.” You are the salt of the earth. *Be* the salt you are meant to be. Just be light. Amen.

- [Isaiah 58:1-9a, \[9b-12\]](#) [1 Corinthians 2:1-12, \[13-16\]](#) [Matthew 5:13-20](#) [Psalm 112:1-9, \(10\)](#)