

**"A City, Salt, and Light"**  
**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**February 6, 2011**  
**Text: Matthew 5:13-16**  
**Dr. David T. Howeth**

There are passages of scripture that are more familiar to us than others. Such is the case with our Gospel lesson for this morning. It comes from what is called the Sermon on the Mount, a compilation of Jesus' teachings that is found in the fifth through the seventh chapters of Matthew. The passage begins with the well-known line, "You are the salt of the earth; . . ."

If you are like me, you have heard all your life about being the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and a city set on a hill. Jesus uses these three images to describe the responsibility of Christians in the world. What Jesus is talking about here is ministry. As you've heard me say before, ministry belongs not optionally but essentially to all Christ's people. Jesus is describing here what we are to be and do in the world [*Broadman Bible Commentary*, p. 106].

But what does it mean for us to be like a city set on a hill? What does it mean for us, as Christians, to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world? Let me try to reframe these images somewhat, to translate these concepts into our frame of reference so that we will know what Christ expects of us as his followers.

*As Christians, we are to be visible in the world so that our faith is apparent.* This is what it means to be like a city set up on a hill. A city

set on a hill can't be missed. It's obvious; it can't be overlooked. Dallas is such a city. No matter how many times I see it, it still impresses me that the downtown skyline is visible from so far away and from any direction. That is because it literally is a city set on a hill.

As Christians, we are to be like that in the world. It should be obvious to everyone you are a Christian. Not just by the bumper stickers you put on your car or the caps or t-shirts you wear, but by the way you talk, by the way you treat other people, by the way you act in general—people should recognize easily that you are a follower of Jesus Christ.

Down through the years certain Christians have attempted to be invisible and separated from the world. The Essene community of Jesus' time called themselves "the children of the light," but they had withdrawn from the world. We are not to be like them. In like manner the monastic movement of the Roman Catholic Church had the idea of separation from the world as a part of its approach to the Christian faith. We are not to take that approach.

In our own society, certain religious groups such as the Mennonites or the Amish remain apart from the mainstream of life. And even we, as good United Methodists, sometimes would prefer for our faith to be strictly a private matter, not shared with the world around us except for our friends at church.

But Christ is calling us to remain visible to the world. We are to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. While it might be easier to practice Christianity in little groups that are isolated from the rest of society, that is not what Jesus had in mind for his followers. We are to be like

him, immersed in the world and in dialogue with it. Our faith is to be like a city on a hill—clearly visible, easy to recognize, and apparent to everyone.

As Christians, we are to act as preservatives in the world, working against moral decay. This is what it means to be the salt of the earth. Salt was necessary to life in the ancient Near East. Babies were rubbed with it when they were born, which apparently had a disinfecting action as well as a religious significance. Salt also was used as a preservative in Jesus' day. It kept meat fresh at a time when there was no refrigeration. Salt kept meat from decaying and spoiling.

We are to be like salt. We are to disinfect and preserve. As salt we are to work against the moral decay around us, but we can do that only if we remain moral ourselves. As Jesus says here, salt that loses its saltiness does no good. Christians who are immoral have a hard time working as agents for moral preservation in the world. *Our role as Christians in the world is to hold the world accountable for its morality.* But let's be clear here about something. By morality we are talking about more than sex, even though sexual immorality is an extremely important concern.

I think one of the great tricks of the devil is his ability to keep us distracted, and if the devil can make Christians think morality is about sex and nothing else, he can keep the Church from acting like salt in a lot of other important areas. But please don't take my word for what God understands true morality to be. When you get a chance take a good look at our passage of scripture from Isaiah for this morning.

As Isaiah makes clear, when we are talking about morality, we need

to be talking about how people are treated—*all* people and not just a few people. We need to be talking about things like freedom, equality, fairness, and justice. We need to be talking about things like providing moral solutions to the problems of hunger, housing, poverty, education, and health care. When we are talking about morality, we need to be talking about insuring the rights and privileges of all people, from the least to the greatest. When we are talking about morality, we need to be talking about showing honor and respect to each and every fellow citizen.

And the way we as Christians can best be moral in this sense is to treat one another in the Church in this way. The Church is supposed to function as an alternative society in the world with a different set of values, an alternative society that models God's justice and mercy in the world. Only if we are such an alternative society can we offer ourselves as that which preserves and disinfects. Only if we are such an alternative society in the world can we function as the salt of the earth.

As Christians, not only are we to make our faith visible to the world and work as a preservative in the world, we are to guide people to see God's glory through the illumination of our good works. This is what it means to be the light of the world. The utter darkness of night before the discovery of electricity is often forgotten by us. We can't imagine a time in which lights did not come on by simply flipping a switch. In Jesus' time, light was necessary to get around in the interior rooms of houses even in the daylight. The way to spread more light in a room was to put the lamp on a stand that would elevate it and thus spread its dim glow across a larger space. To cover a lamp not only blocked its light, it

took away its source of oxygen and put out the light altogether, like what happens when the acolytes extinguish the candles at the conclusion of the worship service.

*The light we provide to the world is the light of our good works.* We are to do good works—acts of kindness, mercy, charity, hospitality, generosity—and not just for people we know and love, like family members and friends, but for strangers. That is our calling in the world. That is our ministry. And our good works are to be done for the glory of God and not for our own glory or gratification. All that we say and do should point people to the love of God in Christ.

This is what it means to be the light of the world. The brightness of our good works should cast light upon the path to Jesus. Like the beacon in a lighthouse on the shore or the landing lights on a runway, the good works we do should make it easier for people to find God and his will for their lives.

As Christians, we are called to be a city on a hill, remaining visible to all around us. We are to be the salt of the earth, working to preserve the morality our society needs to keep it from decaying. And we are to be the light of the world, pointing the way to God in all we say and do. A city, salt, and light. That's what we are to be, and in these ways we are to be in ministry by the power of the Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, and for the glory of God. That is the task to which our faith is calling us. So as we come to the table to receive the grace of God, may we recommit ourselves as God's people to be what we have been called by Christ to be as his Church: a city, salt, and light.