

Salt & Light

As twenty-first century followers of Jesus, it is impossible for us to read the Hebrew scriptures, or "Old Testament" without seeing through Gospel or "New Testament" lenses. This can be problematic in many cases when the foretelling of the holy one may or may not point to Jesus. Today's readings provide an exception to that truth.

Last Sunday we read the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount as part of our assigned readings of the day. You even heard a set of Beatitudes written by myself, updated for the twenty-first century.

Today's gospel picks up where last week's left off. Immediately after the nine petitions of the Beatitudes, we read "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" (Matthew 5.13, NRSV)

Back in Jesus' day, salt was used for many things and it was used both literally and metaphorically. Salt was used to clean, it was used to preserve. Salt was used as a metaphor for loyalty, dependability, and usefulness, among other things. Keep this in mind when Jesus says "you are the salt of the earth". He does not say "you can be, or you should be", Jesus says, "you ARE the salt of the earth".

In Jesus' day, that salt that was used would have been sea salt, which was produced by pouring sea water into pits and waiting for the water to evaporate. The salt was then used for seasoning, preserving and cleaning, among other things.

Colloquially, considering someone as the salt of the earth, means they are "a very good and honest person" (merriam-webster.com).

Looking back at Isaiah, he is challenging the people "'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." (Isaiah 58.3, NRSV) Fasting was used as a time of self-reflection and an opportunity to bring focus back to relationships with God, rather than looking inwardly.

Some fasts were commanded by God at specific times of year. During the time of Lent we are called into closer relationship with God through prayer and fasting. Fasting is not something the postmodern church encourages. For many reasons. If you've ever had to fast before medical tests you know that fasting can make you cranky or "hangry" as some people say.

We are living longer than we ever have before. Fasting today should only be done under medical supervision. Blood sugar, blood pressure, mood, balance, etc., can all be affected through fasting.

Back in the days of Isaiah, fasting was not meant to be used as a punishment, rather, as a way to refocus and reconnect. And so, Isaiah is frustrated with those who do not properly undertake a fast, or worse yet, do not understand the purpose of the fast. Isaiah chides the faithful, who fast, yet treat their workers poorly.

This directly connects to us in this century, when we see record profits from multinational corporations who, in turn, pay their workers poorly. When we see grocery chains locking in prices, which garners them favour with their customers. And yet, if grocery chains can lock in prices when it suits them, why do we have record high grocery prices today?

Back to the Gospel. Matthew records Jesus as saying "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 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." (Matthew 5.14, 15, NRSV)

Jesus is telling us that we should share the things with which we have been gifted. For the majority of us, as followers of Jesus, and as Canadians, we are taught to be humble. There is such a thing as false humility. It is also known as a humble-brag. An example of this, upon receiving a compliment from someone that the cake they are eating is the best they've ever eaten. The humble brag is: "My cake isn't that great, it's just a few things thrown into a bowl. Anyone could do it." The problem with that, for someone who doesn't have baking talent, they could feel very bad about themselves because this incredible cake is supposed to be so easy.

Another way to accept the compliment would be to say “Thank you, it’s a family recipe passed down from my grandmother”, or “thank you, it’s taken me a long time to perfect”, or “Thank you, I’d be happy to share the recipe with you.”

Many years ago, a professor of mine told me that when someone gives you a compliment they are giving you a precious gift. Imagine a beautiful piece of delicate filigree glass or a Fabergé egg. To refuse or deny the compliment is to take that precious object and smash it on the ground. None of us would willingly do that, would we?

And so, when someone recognises a gift we have been blessed with, it is important to acknowledge that compliment, even if all we say is “thank you”.

However, if you know you’re good at something, there’s nothing wrong with admitting it. It’s even better when you share that gift. And that is what Jesus is getting at when he’s talking about the light.

“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.” (Matthew 5.16, NRSV)

Now, speaking of gifts, you have been hearing me prattle on about our four new ministries, right? Let me take a few minutes and introduce you to them.

The four ministries are: Prayer, Visitation, Hospitality and Joy. It is my hope that every parishioner will join one of these ministries. In early March we will have a gathering after Worship to speak more about each one, and for you to ask questions as well. There is more than one way to engage in any of these, experience is not necessary and if required, training will be provided.

The Ministry of Prayer is self-explanatory. Prayer, as we know, can lift up those who are feeling low. It can change things, especially when we do it together. We can engage in prayer across the miles or across a room. It can be done in isolation or in a group. Virtually or in person. It is something for which there are very few limits. Mary Elson is the Team Leader for our Ministry of Prayer.

The Ministry of Visitation is also fairly self-explanatory. It is a ministry for those who like to visit with people. Within the Parish and your community. Our main points of visitation, currently are when a person is in hospital or they are home. Visitation could also expand to visiting in a neutral place, such as a coffee shop. It is a way for the Parish to connect with those who are unable to come to Church or are in need of some reassurance that they are being thought of, prayed for and cared for. Annie Cox is the Team Leader for our Ministry of Visitation.

The Ministry of Hospitality will be our largest ministry as it will cover many things under its umbrella. This ministry will be predominantly for outreach type ministries such as working with the Women's Resource Centre, partnering with the Salvation Army, and the World Day of Prayer.

It will also be the ministry of community suppers, teas, cookie walks, and meal ministry. I'm going to hand over Porch Drops to the ministry of hospitality as we can now gather together, and thus a group can assemble the kits, rather than it being one person, and several people can deliver, as opposed to one person. The UCW and ACW will be part of the ministry of hospitality where we believe that many hands make light work and when you take two separate small groups who struggle to get something together, pairing these two small groups together can be the perfect number for getting things done.

It will also encompass advertising the work of Mission & Service as well as Primate's World Relief and Development Fund or PWRDF and KIVA, Microloans for developing countries. There will be presentations on all of these – eventually.

As of yet there is no Team Leader for the Ministry of Hospitality. If you like event planning, this is the ministry for you!

Under the umbrella of Hospitality is our Prayer Shawl ministry which is overseen by Susan Schmitz. A small group of ladies gather weekly to knit prayer shawls and other projects. This is an open group and new members are always encouraged. Prayer shawls are available to anyone who is in need of comfort.

And finally the Ministry of Joy! This is an “internal” ministry which encourages us to come together, as a Parish for coffee hours after worship, hymn sings, parish breakfast, pot lucks, coffee houses, etc. If you have missed the opportunities to gather as a Parish family, this is where that will happen. Whatever brings you joy, is what this ministry is about. And yet –

This also includes the things that may not necessarily bring joy, but are internal such as looking after the building, changing lightbulbs, etc.

As of yet there is no Team Leader for the Ministry of Joy.

Now, please keep in mind that not every Ministry will have one Team Leader, in some cases there may be a Team of Leaders, if you will.

If you are interested in any of these ministries, please speak to me. If you need more information, please speak to me and come to the information event. And lest you who gather online think there is no room for you, that would be incorrect. You are most welcome to be involved in any of our ministries. Where there is love, there is a way.

And so, let us heed the words of Jesus to let our light shine before others in all ways; through ministry, through service or simply through love.

Let the Church say, Amen.

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry
Fernie Knox United Church & Christ Church Anglican
Sermon for Epiphany 5 – 5 February 2023
Isaiah 58.1-12, 1 Corinthians 2.1-16, Matthew 5.13-20