

Sermon February 6, 2011

Matthew 5:13-20

“Lighten Up”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It's good to see you here today, it means that you survived the Big Storm. It is always good to put big storms like this behind us. But that's just February in Chicago. Granted this was a big one, but we've seen it before and we will again.

We are in that long, tiresome stretch of winter. The days are, more often than not, cold, damp and gray. The cars are painted gray too, with that ugly coating of road salt. And the next Holiday break from work or school seems too distant to even worry about. Cars make funny noises when you try to start them and the sloppy, icy sidewalks and driveways are too hard to navigate. There are a few bright spots though, Valentines Day and President Day, but those don't do all that much to break up the long, dreary month of February.

These are the days when we like to hunker down on the couch. Maybe with a good movie, a fire in the fireplace - perhaps a hot chocolate is in order or a hot toddy. I have a recipe that I call Fredquill. It contains hot tea, honey, a clove or two and a very generous dose of your favorite grain-based, distilled beverage. It does everything Nyquil, Dayquil or any 'quil does, only much, much sublimely.

For these winter days, soups, beef-stew, lasagna and meatloaf are back on the menu. Sweaters and comforters are in order and we all tend to move a bit slower. The few bright and sunny days in February are treasured and we begin to ache for the spring that's coming. We long for a sunshine that will carry warmth with it. It's no wonder many people suffer from the "winter blues" or, as it is known medically, SAD - Seasonal Affective Disorder. This is the type of depression that is often treated with daylight balance light boxes and a regimen of diet and exercise. It's a fact, winter brings us down and we anxiously await the warmth and new life of spring. We all need some kind of light therapy.

So it's good that you made it to Trinity today. Believe it or not, the Lord has just what you need.

You may or may not know that the Bible readings we read each Sunday in church come from what is called the Three Year Lectionary. This is an organized selection of Bible readings that correspond to the church calendar. The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod has always followed a lectionary of this sort. We, as well as many other Christian denominations, have been following this particular 3-year series since 1979. The beauty of this is that it keeps congregations, Pastors and yes, Vicars too, on track with Scripture. It keeps us from veering into personal or worldly unscriptural topics. It keeps us always focused, as Paul says in the reading today, on “Jesus Christ and him crucified” and it keeps our speech “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

What I have found amazing about the lectionary is that it always seems to have just the right message at just the right time for just the right people. But that’s just how God works.

Our Gospel message for today hits us right in the middle of our winter blues. Jesus, during his sermon on the mount and immediately after the Beatitudes, gives us the diet, exercise and light therapy we need right now.

He starts by calling us the salt of the earth. That's a compliment if you younger people aren't familiar with the term. Salt not only seasons our food, but preserves it as well. It enhances the flavor, making foods taste better and it keeps food from spoiling. It also does a great job of making the sidewalks and driveways better for walking on. By calling us the salt of the earth, Jesus lets us Christians know that we are His instruments for making things better in this world and preserving His church. So with the compliment comes a commission - a bit of exercise, if you will.

The only way for one to know just how much saltiness the salt has, one must sprinkle it around. Whether working on our food to make it taste better or working on our sidewalks to make them less slippery, salt must be spread around to work. While our doctors may recommend a sodium restricted diet, our Lord requests us to liberally spread our saltiness, that saltiness being the Good News of Christ and Him Crucified, throughout the world. Think of Jesus' parable of the Sower. He did not care where the seeds were cast, whether they fell on good or rocky soil. He was not stingy with it, he did not make sure the soil was "just the way he liked it", he simply spread that seed, that Word of God, everywhere.

Next, Jesus calls us the Light of the World. Like the salt comment earlier, this is a wonderful compliment. We shine with the Light of Christ! We are baptized children of God - we are his own! Just as the full moon illuminates the crisp and cold February night, reflecting the sun's light onto our dark world, we too shine with the Son of God's merciful light. We are to reflect His love, His mercy and His forgiveness. As the Gospel writer Matthew says, we are to let that Gospel Light shine to "all in the house"! "All" - that means everyone. There's no way around it. There are no exceptions on who we are to let the gospel light of Christ shine!

One can't hear this Gospel reading without thinking of the old song "This Little Gospel Light of Mine". It is a wonderful song and it is based on this passage. But, I am going to select two words from this song to pick on.

"This Little Gospel Light of Mine, I'm going to let it Shine."

Mine. That word's a little bit of a problem for me. Because while, yes, we are the light of the world, the light we shine with is not ours to keep. The light is not "mine" to do with as I see fit. As the Bible passage clearly states, it is "a light to let shine to all". It is the Light of Christ! It is the message of salvation, of forgiveness of sin, it is the message of the cross. It is His light

and all we do is “let it shine”. We do not hide it under the bushel, no, we do not swap out the 700 watt halogen bulb of Christ for our own 40 watt florescent, just to save a little energy or to “not be so bothersome”. We simply let Christ’s Love and Mercy shine in all its brightness. We do not pick and choose whom to shine it on - for the gift of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a gift for all who live in darkness. It is a gift for the sinners of this world. And lest we forget, that’s you, that’s me and that’s everyone, there are no exceptions. Remember who Christ came to? He came to the prostitutes, the sinners and the unwanted. He came to the Samaritan foreigners and to the diseased lepers. He came to the littlest, the lost and the least.

My second word to call out is the word “let”. “Let it shine.” It’s actually a great word. I have no problem with it because to let something happen is to do just that. Let it happen. Get out of the way. Don’t try to push it here or there, don’t try to make it better, more fitting or more politically correct. Don’t try to update it or put your own personal spin on it. Let the full light of Christ shine in all its brilliance! It is His light, His Grace, Love and Mercy - I think He knows best how best to use it.

I love the Sunday mornings here at Trinity when the sunlight brightens the beautiful stained glass. It makes this a very special place and reminds me that it is good Lord, to be here. Here with my fellow Christians. Here in God's house, with His Holy Word and with His precious gifts. There's no better light therapy for our sinful ways. There's no better diet and exercise than to be surrounded by Him and His Sacraments. They are His gift to us, our heavenly compliment.

But remember, there is the commission that goes along with the compliment. It is the commission to spread our "saltiness" and to "shine like a beacon". As much as we love the light shining in, we must shine that light outward! This little brick church, and every church, is called to be a beacon - a bright and shining example of Christ. We are to take the message of Christ crucified out to the world. We are to be shining examples of His mercy, His forgiveness and His love. When people of this town, this neighborhood, this world, see us, they are to see the reflected light of Christ - in our conversations and in our dealings with others, even our enemies... especially our enemies. God's word makes it clear that we are not to be stingy with our saltiness or economical with our light. It is not our light to hide - it is Christ's. He has given it to us freely.

There are many programs here at Trinity that already are letting the light shine and that's a blessing. But you don't have to be on a committee or board to reflect the light of Christ. And it is not as simple as sticking a fish decal on your bumper and showing up on Holidays. Letting Christ's light shine means letting it shine in every aspect of your daily life - in your marriage, at your job, in your school and in your car, in conversations with others and in caring for the unwanted and despised - the littlest, the lost and the least - and all of this without us letting our fears and stubbornness get in the way of the light. We can't let our own storms and sinfulness turn us into bushel baskets. When people talk about this little brick church on the corner, we want them to say, "that is a church that shines with the Love of Christ to all." "That is a church where the people demonstrate mercy and forgiveness even to the diseased and unwanted." "Those people are the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

Yes, I know, "Easy for you to say, Vicar". I get it. We may lose respect and a few friends along the way. It will touch a nerve here or there. We'll probably not make any money at it and we may even get kicked out of a few popular social groups. But we have nothing to fear or worry about. We have been chosen by God himself to be his witnesses, His salt and His light! It is He

who empowers us. It is He who charges us up with His Holy Spirit, His Holy Word and His Holy Supper. He supplies unlimited wattage to His Light, there is nothing we can do to dim it. In fact, instead of trying to turn it down, it is best to put on some sunglasses, some sun block and just “Let it shine, Let it shine, Let it shine”.

Remember, it’s good to put the storms behind us and shine outward. Besides, a liberal sprinkling of His salt of the earth and a generous dose of the Light of Christ is the best diet and light therapy one can have for this cold winter season and all seasons of the year.

In the Holy name of Jesus. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.