

Sermon  
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa  
The Reverend Victoria Scott  
Readings: ISAIAH 58:1-9A (9B-12); PSALM 112:1-9 (10); 1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-12  
(13-16); MATTHEW 5:13-20

“Everyone is looking to be told that [who they are] is right and true and wholly acceptable. No need to tinker and tweak. Exactly right.”

Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries, the largest gang rehabilitation program in the world, wrote these words in his book *Tattoos on the Heart*. This book is about the power of what Boyle calls boundless compassion, and in it, he describes the transformation that is possible for former gang members when they experience unconditional love.

Marcus Borg reminds us that the earliest Christians were not called believers but rather **followers of the Way**. Christianity is about this path and it's a path of transformation. He points out that believing, when you think about it, has very little transformative power. He says: “...you can believe all the right things and still be quite untransformed. You can believe all the right things and still be mean... Christianity *is about entering into a process of transformation*. (Marcus Borg on “What’s Christianity All About”)

Our readings today have transformation woven through them. The prophet Isaiah speaks out against worship and fasting that is disconnected: outside actions that go through the motions without an openness to inner transformation. Our Psalm speaks of connection in relationship and the joy and transformation that come from that. Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth about connections made in sacrificial living, and the transformation that happens through these connections. And our Gospel passage with its vivid images of salt and light. Salt and light both have the power to transform.

Today’s Gospel passage is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount. The words we’ve just heard follow the blessings Jesus spoke last week in the Beatitudes. Last week, I pointed out that Jesus’s words of blessing are descriptive:

blessed *are*. The blessing comes first. We don't arrive at it, we find it, we feel it, right where we are. It is right where we are no matter what it is that we are feeling. Doubt, grief, fear: God is with us in all of it, blessing us.

Jesus continues in the present: You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world. We are salt, even when we feel bland and flavourless. We are light, even when we only see shadows.

It's important for us to remember that at the time Jesus offered these images of salt and light, both were precious commodities. It was used for everything from preserving food to lighting fires. A popular saying among the Romans at the time was *There is nothing more useful than sun (i.e. light) and salt*.

You are salt, you are light: these are words of deep affirmation from Jesus. Jesus isn't assigning a new role here; rather, he's naming who we already are. We don't have to work to *become* salt and light. God made us this way, blessing us with gifts that can bless the world. Jesus is saying, as Gregory Boyle put it: "deep down, you are right and true and wholly acceptable.

Elisabeth Kubler Ross said that:

"People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within."

Jesus is kindling that light within by affirming our potential to flavour the world and to be light in the dark places.

That affirmation, the unconditional love that infuses these words are meant to energize us in walking the Way of Jesus. That love and affirmation are meant to empower us in the work of growth and transformation.

These images of salt and light are meant to stimulate our imagination to respond to the deficiencies of the world. Is the flavour of the world bland, bitter, sour? Salt can help. Is something rotting? Salt can help that. Is it dark? Is it cold? Are people afraid? – light can help with those things. It's not about the salt and light, but about how they are used. We are called to transform our world, and in transforming to be transformed.

Jesus goes on to say that he has come to “fulfil” the law, and he calls on his followers to “exceed” the righteousness of the Pharisees.

One of the most important ideas in the ancient world of the Gospels was “fulfillment.” The Gospel writers often write of scripture being “fulfilled” in and through contemporary events.

What does it mean to fulfil? What does it mean to exceed? Too many times the Church has made fulfilment and exceeding about power and control. About checklists and ticking boxes that are about superficial and disconnected measures of success.

Fulfilment, though, is about embodying something. Superficially following the law isn’t enough. What really counts is to “fulfil” the law from the inside out, to embody its meaning, spirit, and substance. Fulfilling and exceeding the law are infused with transformation. It’s about bringing it to life. When we fulfil a responsibility we perform it – we give it form. Fulfilling the law, then, is about embodying its essential features. It’s about “filling out” its meaning, spirit and substance. This in turn makes exceeding not about surpassing and overtaking, but about expanding. It’s about changing and being changed from the inside out. It’s about growth.

Last week I invited you to see that everything in The Beatitudes is about growth. These things named – poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, peacemaking, pureness of heart, persecution – these are all things that stretch us, that ask us to grow.

Being salt and flavouring the world with God-flavours – flavours of love and compassion – and being light and illuminating the shadows: this is also about growth. Sam Wells says that we should not be called human beings, but rather “human becomings”. He reminds us that “... - every plant, every person, every continent, every planet, every star is - changing all the time. Every time you or I do something, we change. Our history changes and our experience changes, and we become a person whose identity is subtly altered. We are changing every second of every day.” For the whole of this earthly life, we are in a state of “becoming”. When we flavour the world with love and compassion, when we shine a light in the shadowing places of this world, there is growth. We transform and we are transformed.

Gregory Boyle works with gang members with what he calls boundless compassion. Their lives are transformed in this boundless compassion. We have the same power to transform when we are with one another with love and compassion and solidarity.

What does this actually look like, though? Jesus shows us. Jesus is salt and light. Jesus was and is the hands and heart of God in the world. We are called to think, feel, and love as Jesus did. We are to embody the mind of Christ by enacting God's love.

Transformation happens when we enact God's love with others. We are called to be open to the salt and light of others as we are being that salt and light. If we are the salt, and the light of God, we must remind ourselves continually that others are that same salt and light. The way that each of us embodies and enacts that salt, and light, and love will be different. Our hearts and hands and faces and feet are different, and diverse, but our divine essence – our saltiness, our light – is the same.

In the week ahead, know that you are salt and light. Know that you are the embodiment of God's love in this world. Look for ways to flavor the world with God's love and compassion. Ask yourself how you can lighten the darkness, even just a little bit. Look for that salt and light and love in others. In Jesus name. Amen.