

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Year A

Isaiah 58:1-9a

Psalm 112

1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

There are two fundamental questions of life that are presented to us in the gospel reading: Who are we? What are we to do? These are questions that we often ponder, and Jesus gives us answers that we might want to consider.

What does Jesus mean when He says that we are the salt of the earth? To me, salt has two primary uses – to enhance flavor and to preserve. All we need to do is look at the ingredient list on our favorite foods and we will see salt listed as one of the ingredients. Why? Because salt brings out the flavor in most anything we eat. It is almost as if we crave salt. Most snack foods are loaded with salt. We add salt to our food at the table. Why? Because without salt, our food seems bland.

Salt is also a preservative. Throughout history, before there was refrigeration, salt was one of the primary preservatives. By salting meat, it could be kept through time when hunting was not good. It allowed our ancestors to keep foods eatable longer. How does this relate to us as Christians? What was Jesus trying to tell us?

As Christians, we enhance the quality of our neighborhoods by caring for the needs of those around us. Part of the work we already do is to care for the need of people for a safe place to be supported in their struggle against alcoholism. We also provide meals and conversation to those who come on Wednesday night. The wells we help provide make a statement that we care about our neighbors, even halfway around the globe. We DO care. I call on all of us to let more people know we care – not just in the safety of this building, but outside these four walls. Our actions improve the quality of the lives of those impacted by these ministries.

As Episcopalians, we preserve the historical quality of liturgical worship. The beauty of our music and liturgy attracts many to our style of worship. We may not provide the latest innovations in technology and our vestments might seem like something out of another age, but our traditions speak to a hunger many have for a quality experience in worship.

Jesus also said we are to be a light in the world. If we are the salt of the earth – that which enhances and preserves – we are to shed light on what the world is doing. Like salt, light has two primary uses. Light illuminates, brightens all around it. Light also attracts attention. When I was a child, I remember when a circus or fair came to town, they would shine spotlights into the sky to attract our attention. People would be drawn to the place where those spotlights were sitting. They didn't illuminate anything, but they got our attention.

As the light of the world, we also have these two tasks. We are to draw attention to what is happening around us and we are to shine a light on the events that are happening in this world. It

doesn't take a very bright light to illuminate a dark room. Also, it doesn't take much from us to shine a light on what is wrong in this world. We don't need to have a brass band or a million-man march to show people there are problems in our midst. But, as Bishop Rowe says, we need to make our voices heard. Not only will that bring attention; it will also shine a bright light on the issue.

I am not saying that we need to join street protests. I am suggesting that we need to make our voices heard – in the halls of government, to our neighbors, and perhaps even on the streets. People need to see that to be a Christian means that we care about our country, our city, and our neighborhoods.

Jesus says that, unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. The Pharisees focused on how they were to worship God. We need to go beyond the focus on our worship and join Jesus in His call to love everyone – whether we like them or not. Last week we heard that we are to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God. Jesus is telling us that we do exactly that when we show the light and love of God to all.