

“Seeing Who You Are in Other People”

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Butler, PA
February 5, 2017, the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: *“Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.”*

-- 1 Corinthians 2:12, NRSV



*(Photo Credit: Mario Tama, Getty Images,
in an article from the Chicago Tribune Review (online), September 9, 2015.)*

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

As I look out the windows of the sanctuary this morning I can see that we have had a pretty easy time of it this snow season – even though Phil in nearby Punxsutawney through his top-hatted handlers have predicted “six more weeks of winter! What a beautiful marketing scheme! Casting no aspersions on the town of Punxsutawney, along with its wooden billboard cut-out of Phil that greets a visitor entering town, they have quite racket going: if Phil pops out and sees his shadow, we are in for “*six more weeks of winter!*” Doing the math . . . that’s about March 21st . . . The first official day of meteorological spring! BUT, if Phil doesn’t see his shadow, well then, “spring is just around the corner!” And if you ask

"Punxsutawnyans" when that might be, they will most likely say, "Around the middle to third week of March."

Though we have had it pretty easy so far, I have heard that the Sugar Bowl ski resort up in the big mountains of the Sierra Nevada has already had over 446" inches of snow! Wow!

When the snow falls, we crave salt for icy roads and when the winter storms blow – like a Nor'easter – knocking out the power; we want the lights back on!

Such talk helps to put a context on the words from Jesus in Matthew . . . Though there was not much snow to speak of when and where Jesus first spoke these words to his disciples! Perhaps up north in Israel: on Mount Hermon, or on the Golan Heights . . . but down south – In and around Jerusalem? -- no.

What Jesus does say is *"You are the salt of the earth! . . . You are the light of the world!"* What he doesn't say – and make sure you understand this – what he doesn't say is *"IF you do such and such you are the salt of the earth; If you do this or that you are the light of the world . . ."* He doesn't use conditional language here; it is declarative speech: *"You are the light of the world . . . You are the salt of the earth."*

I think a lot of times we put conditions on things instead of living declaratively what we already are. I wonder if we were to really live more declaratively about who we are in other people, perhaps we would be doing greater things for the kingdom of God. I said in the sermon title "Seeing Who You Are in Other People", but in order to be light and salt you have to be where it has an effect! Jesus said you don't put light under a bushel basket, it doesn't do any good, what's the point of that? If anything, it begins to burn the basket (if there is any kind of oxygen supply) – and that's a bad thing . . . One of the prophets, Jeremiah, once said, *"If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I*

cannot." (Jeremiah 20:9 NRSV) . . . Such is the passion of God in us longing to be expressed outwardly, visibly. Jesus said in essence: express it! Express it as light! Express it as salt! You are already both!

I love the Greek language. The word for salt that has lost its saltiness is "mo-rain" – "useless". Salt that has lost its saltiness is "mo-rain-o"; and the word that comes into the English language from that word is the word "moron" . . . "moronic". It's akin to imbecilic. Tough words!

(I guess the alternate version of my sermon title based on the language here could have been: *"Do something useful, don't be a moron!"* That's pretty much what Jesus is saying in Matthew, chapter 5. Be useful. Be light in the darkness, be salt that flavors, seasons the atmosphere, the contexts in which you live.)

We do our best work as disciple of Jesus Christ when we live into the world into which we are placed; not in any kind of separatist living – separatist societies have a hard time continuing on – the single surviving Shaker community at Sabbathday Lake in New Gloucester, Maine lost one of its three remaining members last week at the age of 89.ⁱ But in a sect where there is no marriage or conjugal relations among its members and barring new members joining, its fate is often sealed! Do you remember Simeon Stylites, the pole-sitting monk, of a few sermons past? He, too, lived a separated life.

Think about the uses of light and salt. We put salt in our foods to make it more flavorful; bring out more taste – to make it stand out! And light? I don't know about you, but the older I get, the more light I need! Any more the buttons and dials on the smart cart equipment of the University where I teach are harder and harder to see in low light! It wasn't that long ago I could see fairly well in low-light, but now?

Light is useful. Salt is tasty. We're supposed to be both. Jesus tells us that we already are, both!

How well are you looking at those others around you in ways that has you seeing yourself in them and vice versa?

Turner Classic Movies is having its big "31 Days of Oscar" recognition this month. Elaine and I are big fans and this whole month is dedicated to bringing Oscar winning and Oscar nominated films to cable television. TCM is presenting their selections alphabetically. These last few days, they have been in the "Bs". Yesterday, the movie was "Boys Town", starring Spencer Tracey and a young Mickey Rooney. It is the true-to-life story of Father Edward J. Flanagan and the members of the community that became the original Boys' Town in Nebraska in the 1930s. There is a website run by the community that links to the original film.ⁱⁱ From this early vision of Father Flanagan, Boys' Town is now a huge mission serving at risk and disadvantaged youth in many different locations.

The film opens with Father Flanagan visiting on death row at the state penitentiary with a man who is about to be executed. As the man makes his last confession, the prisoner speaks to those in authority confessing his crime, but also details the terrible life he had to live; how, as a young ten-year old boy growing up alone and unprotected, his spirit was killed by difficulty after difficulty without any help or hope. As Father Flanagan listens to him tell his tale, he asks himself, what happened that this man ended up where he is now? What if an intervention had been made? And in a way, Father Flanagan put himself into that man's shoes as a scared 10 year old kid . . . And then Father Flanagan began to think of all the kids that were at risk in his own neighborhood and a lot of them were unkempt, unschooled, and unloved like this man, now on death row, had once been as a ten-year old boy. This became a resolve for him that created Boys Town. He saw himself in that other person and brought salt and light into it . . .

One of the toughest struggles Father Flanagan had was with one boy, Whitey Marsh (played by Mickey Rooney in the film); it took a lot of loving to see Whitey transformed. Father Flanagan emphasized three words in the path of serving boys like Whitey in his ministry at Boys' Town: help, healing and hope. What Father Flanagan did was live out the gospel in his life in the lives of those

around him; he put himself into their shoes; he imagined the "what-if" if he did not act, then interposed love, and grace, and care.

This week and continuing on think of the ways that you are being salt and light where you live, in your activities, in the words you say, in the actions you take. How are you making a difference in other people's lives? And I mean a difference that is for Christ; a difference that is loving; that is gracious. It is hard for us to think this way sometimes because it may seem boastful on our part – *"Well, look at that! I did a great thing for the kingdom today! I was really a blessing today!"*

I can understand this . . . But maybe we need to be a bit more understanding of the ways in which we are making those kinds of differences because, at the very least, what it does tell us is that God is at work through you to others . . . And then, of course, the other side of that is how are other people being salt and light in your life? How are they making a difference in your life? Like salt, how are they helping to preserve and cure and enhance your life; providing a zest to it that enables you to see better, more clearly and well, what it is you need to see. Like light, as we see ourselves in others and as we mirror their lives to them, all of us, then, are better able to see God at work in the world, more and more. Scott Hoezee, a preacher at Calvin Seminary relates the followingⁱⁱⁱ:

"The great Bible Scholar and Scripture translator Eugene Peterson was asked what he would say if he were writing what he knew would be his very last sermon. Peterson replied, 'I think I would want to talk about things that are immediate and ordinary. In the kind of world we live in, the primary way that I can get people to be aware of God is to say, 'Who are you going to have breakfast with tomorrow, and how are you going to treat that person?' In my last sermon, I guess I'd want to say, 'Go home and be good to your spouse. Treat your children with respect. Do a good job at work.'

"Peterson is right. We need to be righteous people of salt and light in the real world, and that involves genuinely being with real people, listening to them well, and treating them (Note: like Father Flanagan did the boys he cared for) as the little images of God they are."

The photo image I used in the sermon today was one of many I googled on the topic of "salt shakers". There were hundreds of picture possibilities, but I chose the one on the front page (on the bulletin's cover – a Getty Image, taken by Mario Tama, that accompanied an article from the Chicago

Tribune-Review). Please notice it. . . What I like about the picture is that it looks true, real, not composed; a random shot taken in a booth at a diner; a few hash browns remain on the plate; the salt shaker is close by it. . . A picture taken just after a breakfast perhaps . . . where someone like you is asking another how it is going with them, and they tell their story . . . They in turn are asking you, how is it going for you? . . . A lot can happen at a table that is good and life-giving; a lot can be revealed and blessing can come.

Jesus welcomes us to this table in the sanctuary. Our Lord is salt and light, surely; and it is here where we are blessed by his life to carry on the work of salt and light he tells us we are already. . . The Rev. Chris Thomas says it this way: *"Salt and light are only useful when they enhance something else. We, as followers of Jesus, fulfill our roles as disciples when we flavor the earth and illuminate the world with our actions and words that ultimately point to Christ."*^{iv}

As you welcome the real, spiritual presence of Christ at this table, welcome him into your life and share that presence in others; see it being shared with you . . .

"Please pray with me. Great God, we thank you for filling us up to the brim with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Thank you for being a God of surprises and a God who shows us again and again the true meaning of Christ-likeness in the least likely people and places. Bless us that we may be a blessing of righteousness to all we meet, in Christ, Amen."^v

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ From an article in the New York Times, online. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/04/us/sister-frances-ann-carr-one-of-the-last-three-shakers-dies-at-89.html?_r=0

ⁱⁱ <http://www.boystownmovie.org/storyBehind/index.asp>

ⁱⁱⁱ From Scott Hoezee, the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin seminary, in a sermon at Day 1, entitled, "All Righteousness, All the Time" (020517).

^{iv} The Rev. Chris Thomas at Day 1, http://day1.org/5555-salty_luminescence

^v From Scott Hoezee's closing prayer in the sermon cited earlier (at # iii.).