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Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

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INFLUENTIAL

Have you ever had unsalted, unbuttered popcorn? Can you imagine eating without there being any taste at all to each meal? There is a difference between surviving and thriving, and not just in the area of nourishment. God wants all people to thrive. Last Sunday, we focused on the beatitudes, Jesus' words indicating that God's blessings are broader than we tend to think. In our reading today which immediately follows the beatitudes, Jesus introduces two new images - salt and light - and in effect he says, "This is how all of you become a blessing." You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world. Live out your identity as salt and light, each of which exist to draw out the good in things around them - they don't exist solely for themselves.

Salt doesn't taste that great all by itself. We would never sit down and eat a bowl of salt, but I might eat half a bag of salted tortilla chips in one sitting. Salt only works in relation to other things. It draws out the true flavors of the food it touches. In other words, salt's purpose is to bless or enhance other things.

And it's the same with light. You can't really see light until it hits something. Each new morning, the rays of the sun illumine the beauty of God's world which cannot be seen in total darkness. So we, who are disciples of Jesus, are called to be salt and light in the world - to draw out the best in everything around us in a world that too often has lost its flavor and is sometimes overwhelmed by darkness. Being blessed is a gift from God - being a blessing to others is the most appropriate response to this gift. And we do that by being salt in a flavorless world and light in a world of darkness.

When the prophet Isaiah was speaking at what may have been some kind of a prayer meeting, the people were complaining about God saying in effect, "Why do we fast, but God doesn't notice?" There seemed to be a desire for a transactional relationship with God, one where the people were hoping that if they did A, then

God would give them B. But God was not impressed by their expressions of piety, because even though they were living sacrificially in their religious observances, their lives outside of the place of worship did not reflect God's values. We heard God's voice in response: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.... Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn."

Author Robert Fulghum tells of attending a conference a number of years ago on the island of Crete. It was an event organized by an institute whose facilities overlook a small airstrip where in the Second World War, Nazi paratroopers invaded the island and were attacked by peasants wielding kitchen knives. The retribution was terrible. The populations of whole villages were lined up and shot for assaulting Hitler's finest troops. Hatred of all Germans quickly became a central motivating force, so a man named Alexander Papaderos began an institute dedicated to healing the wounds of war. He believed Germans and Cretans had much to give one another, much to learn from one another. He figured if they could forgive each other and construct a creative relationship, then any people could. As the conference was concluding, Papaderos got asked, probably in jest, "What is the meaning of life?"

In response, he took out his wallet and removed a small round mirror about the size of a quarter. Then he explained, "When I was a small child during World War II, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun could never shine. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places that I could find.

I kept the little mirror, and as I grew up, I would take it out at idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became an adult, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game, but a metaphor of what I could do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light - be it truth or understanding or knowledge - is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it. I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world - into the dark places of human hearts - and change some things in some people. Perhaps others seeing it happen will do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”¹

We, as part of the church of Jesus Christ, have the joyful task of reflecting God's light. We don't get up on top of the roof blasting trumpets to announce what good people we are. But we do openly express that a life of compassion and sharing, a commitment to justice and kindness is a wonderful way not just to survive, but to thrive. We do it with more than what we find in our wallets. We let people know that what we do is in response to all the blessings that God has bestowed upon us. We know that we are not solving all the problems of hunger and homelessness and poverty and war. But what we do matters to those with whom we have contact, it matters to God, and it matters to us. The light we are blessed to get to reflect, reaches our hearts as well. One paraphrase of the verse about light reads: “You're here to be light, bring out the God-colors in the world.”² There are God-colors that are waiting to be brought out – with joy, that's what we're called and enabled to do. Thanks be to God.

¹ Robert Fulghum, It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It, Ivy Books, 1991.

² Eugene Peterson, The Message, NavPress, 2003.