

Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Salt of the Earth

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We have a tendency to identify the holy with that which is set apart, separate from the profane and the mundane. We have a tendency to identify the holy with the pure, the clean, the innocent. And we feel a need to protect what is holy, as if it's the divine that is fragile and vulnerable rather than ourselves.

In today's Gospel Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth. Now in light of such assumptions about holiness, the striking thing about salt is that it isn't much good by itself. Imagine trying to swallow a teaspoon of salt. I couldn't do it, and if you could it might kill you for all I know. But add that same teaspoon of salt to a pot of stew and the stew tastes better than ever. In fact without any salt I don't know if I could eat the stew either. So what does Jesus mean by comparing holiness with salt? He is saying that the holy is not to be kept apart, carefully removed from the messiness or the dullness of ordinary life; its to suffuse every aspect of our lives, releasing the flavor inherent within the ten thousand things. Salt by itself can preserve the dead, but it cannot sustain the living. I remember winters in Chicago where salt is thrown around with abandon to melt the ice on streets and sidewalks. Its an act of desperation really, there is just too much snow, and too much traffic to try to cart it all away. But Chicagoans pay for it in dead grass, ruined shoes and, until recently, rusted out cars. Walking the sidewalks of Chicago in winter I was sure I could feel the soles of my shoes dissolving.

In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah is writing from exile in Babylon. Now one of the traumas of the exile was that people could no longer worship in the temple. In fact the Babylonians had destroyed the temple. But without the temple, where was God? In this profane land of their enemies, had they been robbed of all they hold sacred, abandoned by all that is holy? This would have been particularly acute for Isaiah, as he had been a priest of the temple in Jerusalem. His task had been to maintain the holy of holies where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Did his life still have any point?

Isaiah prophesies to his people that God can still be found, even far from Jerusalem. For as Jesus and Paul will also claim five hundred years later, God dwells not only in the temple but in his holy people and we can find the sacred by holding one another sacred, particularly those who most need to be honored, those held "dirty" in our society—the sick and the needy, the sinner and the oppressed.

Share your bread with the hungry,
shelter the oppressed and the homeless,
clothe the naked when you see them
and do not turn your back on your own....
if you satisfy the afflicted

then light shall rise for you in the darkness,
and the gloom shall become for you like midday.

In the Gospels the priests are not allies of Jesus, they are his enemies for Jesus preached against their isolation of the sacred from the life of ordinary people. In the name of cultic purity the holy must be protected from the tainted, the pure kept apart from the possessed, the ill from the sick, the righteous from the sinner, the priests from the people. Jesus however heralded a new Israel, an anti-Israel one might say, of the sick and the sinner, the outcast and the outsider. Jesus deliberately drew his followers from the ranks of the ritually impure, sinners and tax-collectors, beggars and prostitutes, the sick and the possessed. In fact, having been conceived out of wedlock, Jesus himself would have been thought to have been ritually impure by his family and neighbors, all those who did not receive a re-assuring visit from the angel.. His point was not to side with sin or poverty, crime or disease, but to bear witness that it is those who suffer or even perpetrate such evils who are most in need of God's redeeming word and healing touch. And unlike many of us, much of the time, they know, they can hardly forget it for they are reminded of it every time they open their eyes.

And what applies to us in our relationship with our neighbor also applies to us in our relationship to ourselves. Jesus does not call for us to set apart some part of ourselves and keep it sacred and pure, removed and protected from the rest of our lives. Salt hermetically sealed is worthless. It might as well be thrown away for all the good it would do. Rather we are called to use our salt to season the whole stew, every day. We are called to extend what we hold sacred to all parts of our lives, to attend especially to those parts of ourselves where we fall short, where our limitations are only too evident, our neediness only too raw. As with our neighbor in need we are called upon to feed those part of ourselves whose hunger only undermines us, clothe those parts of ourselves whose nakedness only exposes us to shame and ridicule..

So too, Jesus calls us to be a light to the world, and to bring the Light of Christ into our own darkness, by acknowledging the ambiguity and ambivalence that haunts our own lives, thereby draw out the taste of God latent even within our own grime, however smudged and fractured. We are to bring the light into those parts of our souls that do indeed lie hidden in the dark, haunted by fear, driven by cravings, or riven with shame and rage. If we strive to release the oppressed, feed the hungry, console the afflicted, both without and within, then Christ, our Light, as we chant as we enter the dark church at the Easter Vigil, Christ our Light, shall indeed shine forth and our gloom shall become like midday. Like Paul, our weakness shall become a revelation of God's strength. Our fear the stage on which God's love plays out.

May we have eyes that can see God's light shining through our darkness, that we may ourselves become a blessing to all we meet, that we may ourselves become salt for the earth and a light to the world.