

Sermon on salt, light and true righteousness, Feb. 5, 2023

In today's gospel, Jesus says a shocking thing. Not so shocking to us, because we're used to him criticizing the Pharisees and scribes and so on. In fact, some Christians think the Pharisees were evil people. But they weren't. They were people who loved God and were very careful to keep every bit of the commandments. And Jesus says to his disciples that unless our righteousness is more than the righteousness of the Pharisees, we won't even get into the Kingdom of Heaven! This would have shocked everyone, especially the Pharisees, who were being so careful and scrupulous just so they'd be approved by God. And Jesus says it's not good enough. If they're not good enough, who possibly could be? So that's the bad news: you can't work your way into the Kingdom of Heaven by perfectly following all the rules and rituals.

I think some of the Pharisees had a problem that people have had ever since. We figure if we follow all the rules we're good. If we come to church every Sunday and put in our envelope and know when to stand and sit and which one of the many books to use at any given time and maybe we cross ourselves at the proper places and take communion and have the prayer book memorized, and say our bedtime prayers, we'll be good.

When we lived in Lockeport, the owner of the garage we went to told us this story. There was a guy, well known in the town as a ne'er-do-well, drank, unkind to his family, and so on, and our friend Onden had done some work on his car. And the guy didn't pay him. And didn't pay him. But one day this guy went to a Pentecostal revival and he got saved. He gave his life to Jesus, he was baptised, and he said he was a new man. And actually, he did drink less and was nicer to his family, and he started going to church. So this was very good. So Onden asked him, next time he saw him, about paying the money he owed. "Oh, no!" said the man. "When I was baptised, Jesus washed away all my sins and paid all my debts. That was the old man who owed you that money. I'm a new man and I don't owe anyone anything!" So some progress, but there were still a ways to go.

This is what the Lord is complaining about in Isaiah, too. He says the people are surprised that God isn't answering their prayers and being pleased with their fasts and accepting their offerings. He says, "You want to know what I want to see for a fast? I want to see you loosing the bonds of injustice, sharing your bread with the hungry, welcoming in the homeless, clothing the naked. What you're doing is all for show. I want you to stop gossiping and blaming each other and quarrelling. You work on these things and I'll be pleased with your fasts and accept your offerings and hear your prayers."

The point is that God would like some substance to our faith, not just show. It's not about lighting the right number of candles or wearing the right clothes or knowing the 10 commandments. Those are good, but if that's all you're doing, you're missing the point. In today's language, you've got to walk the talk. Going to church is not good enough. You also need to act like you heard the message in church and are trying to live by it.

We talked about the first part of today's gospel at Parish Council and we all felt it sounded harsh. "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its savour, it's good for

nothing but to be thrown out and trampled under foot." Harsh. I've been thinking more about that since then and here's what I've come up with.

If you have a lamp and you turn it on, you don't stick it under a cardboard box. The whole point of a lamp is to give light. If it isn't giving light, it's not much use to you. If you have salt, the whole point of salt is to make food taste better, to preserve it from rotting (think salt cod), to melt ice. If the stuff you've got isn't doing this, it's not worth much to you. It's not fulfilling any of its purposes.

One summer we went and opened up the cottage and the salt had been left in its cardboard box since the previous summer. Maybe since the summer before that. And you know what? It didn't taste of much. Have you ever had that happen? We threw it out and bought some more. It wasn't doing what we had bought it for in the first place. And if it wasn't doing that, what's the point in keeping it around?

The whole point of being a Christian is to offer ourselves to God in love and allow God to transform us so we're more like Jesus. If we're just going through the motions so people will think we're good and then our lives don't change at all, we've missed the heart of it. We might look like a lamp but we're not fulfilling the purpose of a lamp. We might look like salt, but we're not doing what salt does. We've missed the boat.

Now this doesn't mean that going to church regularly and listening to sermons and saying our bedtime prayers and so on is a bad thing. It isn't. It's a good thing. Jesus went to the synagogue every Saturday. He went to the Temple in Jerusalem for all the major feasts, as a good Jew should. He prayed a lot. His apostles hung out in the Temple after he was raised from the dead. The early Christians met on the first day of the week to worship God and have communion. We need to gather and worship God together.

People say they can find God just as well on the golf course and naturally, God is on the golf course, too. But I doubt very much if most of the people who go to golf courses are looking for God there or would notice him if they tripped over him. It's when we gather in Jesus' name that God is most fully present to us.

Jesus was telling the Pharisees off later on (Matthew 23:23 if you want to look it up), and he said, "You people are so careful to follow the law about tithing and give an exact 10th of everything you grow, even tithe the herbs in your garden that grow like weeds everywhere. But you've forgotten the really important things: justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have done those things as well as the tithe. Do both."

Today he said he hadn't come to abolish the law and the prophets. He'd come to fulfill them. And he says if you break them, you'll be least in the Kingdom of heaven. Mind you, you still get in, unlike the Pharisees in the next sentence. But he isn't advocating throwing all those things out. They serve an important purpose. He's just saying they're not enough in and of themselves. Fulfilling the letter of the law isn't enough, just like properly performing the rites of the church isn't enough.

When we're Christians, it's not enough to go to church, but we also need to let church change us. When we listen to the words of the gospel and the sermon and the prayers and the hymn words, we need to let them sink in and become part of us. Not so we can quote them but so we can live them. When we receive communion bread and wine, we have to also receive Jesus into our lives as our Lord and let him change us.

I don't think, on reflection, that Jesus is saying that if we lose our savour we're going to be thrown out into the street. I think he's trying to make a point. The whole point of salt is to be salty and it's not really salt if it's not salty. The whole point of a lamp is to give light and it's not really a lamp if it doesn't give light. The whole point of a Christian life is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. If we aren't doing both those things, we're kind of missing the point.

Now, we might ask ourselves, if people who are following all the rules perfectly still aren't good enough, where's the hope for us? Well, the good news is, that God doesn't require us to follow the rules perfectly. God mostly wants us to understand the really important things, like loving our neighbours, and work towards that. And when we mess up, which we will, to come back and ask for forgiveness and help. God is not a perfectionist and we don't have to be either. Caring for each other is the important thing, and caring for God. And we grow into that.

Now, I don't need to tell you that we're not going to get this overnight. This is a gradual process, as it was for the Israelites, as it is for everyone. We're still going to get it wrong sometimes. But there should be noticeable changes. If we look back on what we were like 20 years ago, are we a better person now? Are we more loving, more caring, more compassionate, more forgiving. Do we love our neighbours more?

I was having a conversation with my Mother-in-law once, a few years ago. Someone or other had been a real pain to her. And she said quite charitably, "Well, we don't know what she's been going through lately. We need to make allowances. She's often quite a good person." And I thought at the time, you know, that's the decades of Christian teaching and reading and praying that have brought her to this place where she can forgive and be kind and caring to someone who's a pain.

The other good news for us is that God's Spirit within us helps us, guides us, grows Jesus in us. It is God's Spirit that makes us salty and makes us shine like lights. When we turn to God for help with this, we are changed. And we start walking the talk. And, as Isaiah says, then our light will break forth like the dawn, kind of like someone taking that basket off the lamp. Fortunately for us, God's Spirit is what can restore the saltiness to the salt.

Who knows? Maybe after years of listening to sermons and reading his Bible, that converted ne'er-do-well in Lockeport will pay Onden. Conversion of life takes time. And our God is very patient and compassionate and thinks we're worth taking trouble over.