

Proper 15, 11th Sunday After Pentecost, August 19/20, 2006, Liturgical Year “B”

St. Bartholomew’s Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. Richard Molison – Assisting Priest

Scripture: Matthew 5:13

“Be Salt!”

When Barbara and I travel to visit our son and his family in Hopewell Junction, we access the I-390 at Mt. Morris via the Geneseo ramp. Just before we get to this ramp, we pass a salt mine as witnessed by the mountain of rock salt stock piled outside the mine shaft. Here in this country, salt is mined somewhat like coal. But such is not the case in ancient Israel.

At the time of Christ, salt was scraped and gathered from sea shores, such as the shore of the Dead Sea. However, this process of gathering salt from the seashore resulted in a salt product containing many impurities. Yet even with these impurities, such salt was used by people as a common seasoning and as a preservative. But there was another use of salt that is not commonly known.

If we were privileged to have accompanied Jesus and the disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Shechem, some 30 miles north of Jerusalem, we would have the opportunity to notice clay ovens built next to houses on the roadside. Such ovens have been around long before Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. Each village had at least one large community oven for village use.

The common fuel for these ovens was not what we would think. Fuel for these ovens was not wood. Something having greater availability than wood was used as fuel. You, see, fuel for these village ovens was ... camel dung. One of the duties that befell young girls of the family in those days was to learn how to collect fresh camel dung, mix salt into it, and hand mold this mixture into patties to be placed in the sun to dry. It may surprise many here this morning to learn that this same procedure continues to be in use today in many of the third world countries. (Gary)

Why was salt mixed with the camel dung? To act as flavoring? – I don’t think so. To act as a preservative? – I don’t think so.

Dried patties burned without a mixture of salt and placed on the bare dirt floor of an oven would produce little heat. In these large community ovens, a flat slab of salt would be used as a base upon which dried patties would be placed. The base or bottom of these large ovens would be covered with a relatively thick layer of salt. Dried patties, mixed with salt and placed on a base of salt, produces a significant amount of heat.

You see, the salt acts as a catalyst, increasing significantly the heat produced. A catalyst is an agent that accelerates a chemical reaction. A catalyst is an agent that makes a change happen. Salt, mixed in the camel dung, becomes the agent that increases the heat given off in the burning process. Eventually, patties burn out. The salt base at the bottom of the oven ultimately loses its catalytic abilities as well and thus becomes useless.

The salt base at the bottom of the oven then is removed from the oven and thrown to a most convenient near by place – the roadway. The spent debris is thrown over the existing road surface. This act has the very practical effect of improving one’s footing as people walked on the road.

I invite you to turn in a pew Bible to page 880, to Matthew, chapter five, and to verse thirteen that may be found at the bottom of the left hand column. I invite you to read verse 13 with me:

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5:13 "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot."

When Jesus said that when salt has lost its taste, lost its saltiness, it is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out, thrown on the roadway, and trampled under foot.

However, the term *taste* used in verse 13 bothered me for we are not using salt in this verse as a seasoning. I have never had the experience of salt losing its taste. What I found to be very interesting is that a meaning of the Greek term for “taste” also means *strength*. The use of the term *strength* makes greater sense to me. Thus we can accurately read verse 13 saying, that if salt has lost its *strength*, lost its catalytic strength, lost its change agent strength, it is no longer good for anything, but to be thrown out onto the roadway and trampled under foot.

Jesus said that we are to *be salt*. It is my opinion that Jesus meant for us to be catalysts, change agents, agents to make something happen. And what is it that Jesus expects us to be catalysts of? Teaching and preaching the Word. The world does not know Christ. We are to be catalysts, we are to be Christ’s change agents, we are to be Christ’s salt.

But when salt proves to be useless, when salt loses its catalytic properties, it was thrown out. The message for the Christian may be that such uselessness invites spiritual failure. If a Christian is not fulfilling his purpose as a Christian, if a Christian is not fulfilling Christ’s expectation of being a change agent for Him, then he or she is on their way to spiritual disfavor with Jesus. We are meant to be the salt of the earth. If we are not the spiritual catalyst for others to be brought to Christ, then we are courting a spiritual tragedy.

To be the salt of the earth is to be the catalyst to start fires; spiritual fires. As Christians, as disciples of Christ, we are to make hearts burn for Jesus.

From Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 10, verse 13, we read, “For who ever will call on the Name of the Lord will be saved.” Paul quoted this passage from the prophet Joel, “and it will come about that whoever calls on the Name of the Lord will be delivered.” The apostle Peter also used this same passage in his sermon to the people on Pentecost. Three times in scripture we meet this passage. And according to biblical studies, three times is an undisputable affirmation of the truth and efficacy of these words. We are to believe them! “Who ever will call on the Name of the Lord will be saved.”

But Paul, in the very next verse, 14, raises some very good questions, questions having a direct bearing on whom we are as change agent Christians. Paul asks three questions, “*How* will the people call on the Name of the Lord, someone in whom they do not yet believe?” “*How* will the people believe in Him whom they have yet to hear?” “*How* will they hear without a preacher and teacher?”

If people are not taught the Word, if people do not hear the Word preached, then how in the blue blazes can we expect others to be brought to Christ? And then Paul asks the 64,000 dollar question, “*How* will they preach unless they are sent?” This question brings to mind that wonderful passage from James, “Faith without works, faith without proof of that faith, faith without action coming out of that faith, faith without bearing fruit of that faith, is ... dead.”

Paul then makes the statement which is taken directly from the prophet Isaiah, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring Good News of good things.” For Isaiah, reception of this good news was given

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in the context of when the Hebrew people received welcomed news that King Cyrus granted permission for them to return to their homeland, ending the some 40-year exile. Can we imagine, can we begin to fathom the joy and jubilation that arose upon hearing the good news: “They were going home!”

It is with this same joy and jubilation that we are to be the salt of the earth; that we are to be the catalyst for bringing others to Christ, that we are to teach, to preach and to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, for through his sacrifice and love for us, we are going to go home to be with him for all eternity. Alleluia! Praise the Lord! “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring this news of salvation to the people.” So writes Isaiah, Joel, and Paul. We are to be the 21st century feet who bring the “Good News” of salvation to the people.

A preacher of a non-denominational church located just outside Niagara Falls once shared with me that he does not equate the success of his congregation’s ministry by Sunday’s attendance only. There is another factor that for him is of greater importance. This pastor measures the church’s success by the number of souls members of the congregation have led to Christ, have led others to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. And he is right!

Many Sunday worshippers leave it up to the clergy to lead souls to Christ? Yes, clergy have a role in evangelizing the world, but to assume they are alone in this ministry and are solely responsible for converting souls for Christ is a tragic falsehood. This Niagara Falls pastor is right-on by correctly identifying the priority ministry and mission of his people.

So, the question I have for you to ponder about this (afternoon) morning is: “How many souls have you led to receive the Good News of the redeeming love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. How many souls have you led to Christ?” Can you just imagine the impact on this parish if each one of us brought just one person to Christ and to this parish? Our Sunday attendance would double! Fr. Ward would be ecstatic! Fr. Commins would be ecstatic! The treasurer would be ecstatic! But most of all, our Lord would be dancing and rejoicing in heaven, for we would be doing what he commanded us to do: “Be salt; be catalysts, be change agents in the lives and hearts of those who are lost.”

The fields that need harvesting have significantly increased as a result of the heresy taught by our national church. The need for teaching, the need for sharing the Good News of Christ, is more critical than ever. People out there are hungry for the Word. They are not being fed. We know this. This is nothing new. Some of you have personally experienced this avoidance, this lack of teaching the Word of God.

There seems to be an apathetic attitude to sit idly by while waiting for the Archbishop of Canterbury and/or the world Primates to act, waiting for them to make decisions that will reshape the world Anglican Communion. Pittsburgh’s Bishop Robert Duncan emphasized in his address to those attending the conference in Pittsburgh two weeks ago the critical need for “Reformation Behavior.” To which Fr. Jim McCaslin supports and stated, “If we do not embrace the holiness of life to which Jesus calls us, if we do not commit ourselves to radical discipleship and *fruitful* ministry, and if we do not live into a Reformation of both individual and corporate behavior, then the realignment of Orthodox American Anglicanism may well turn toward increasing factionalism rather than toward a uniting, *biblical missionary* church.”

We are to commit ourselves to radical discipleship and fruitful ministry. We are called, we are commanded, we are expected by Jesus to teach the Word. Each one of us is called to teach the pure

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doctrine of faith, that those who hear may believe, and those who believe may receive Christ, and those who receive Christ may receive eternal salvation.

The Christian faith is not ours to covet, not ours to be selfish about, for in so doing, we will be held accountable for violating the 10th Commandment. We will be held guilty of holding the Christian faith up as an idol to claim for our own. Our own the Christian faith is not. This is sinful. Our faith is meant to be shared, to give away. For many years, we had a plaque hanging from our kitchen wall. On this plaque were the words, “Love is not love until it is given away.” Jesus manifested this truism when he hung from the cross giving his life and love for you and me.

Just as God reached out beyond himself to create and to love us, so are we to reach out beyond ourselves to love and to teach others the redeeming love of Christ. If we are not reaching out beyond ourselves, we are not a reflection of the true loving image of God, nor a reflection of God’s true loving nature and personhood.

I close with those wonderful, yet challenging words of Jesus:

“Go therefore and make disciple of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
and **teaching** them to obey everything that I have commanded you.
And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

My brothers and sisters in the Lord, Jesus has taken away any excuse we may want to use for not doing as he commanded, for he said that “I am with you always...” What greater help do we need? James asks, “Is your faith alive or dead?”

Jesus said, “Be salt!” Be a catalyst, be change agents Jesus expects you to be. Accept the mission to bring souls to Christ. Jesus will bless you with the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit.

And the people of God said, “Amen!”