And a Little Child Shall Lead Them?
Series: The Church is for Children and the Future
Matthew 5: 13-20
5th Sunday After the Epiphany
FUMC, Little Rock
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Sources: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, “Feasting on the Word”, Year A, Volume 1, 5th Sunday after the Epiphany, pages 332-337.

Who are we and what are we to do? Those two questions hang in the back closet of every church and every Christian disciple. For over a month we have been thinking about the church and the reasons why some have said, “it is not for me!” Many of those reasons come forth from the observation of who they think we really are and what they think we are really doing! These are good questions to ponder that will help keep us on the main thing and in line with who we say we are. Are we really about the business of our Lord and of his Christ, or about some other business that doesn’t make a difference to the transformation of lives and the world.

This text that has just been read to you answers it truthfully. You are the Salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Let us pray. May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and all the work we do be as salt to an un-flavored world, and light to all who walk in the darkness. Amen.

It is not inconsequential or trivial that when God wanted to reveal himself to the world he did it through a child, a baby, born in a lowly manger stall. It is not light or trite that when God entered the world in Jesus, he did it through a poor unmarried woman named Mary who came from a no nothing town named Nazareth. In acting this way, God is showing us that his way is different from the ways of the world, in fact, just the opposite - a way the world cannot understand that there is strength in weakness and power in vulnerability.

In the book, the First Christmas, Crossan and Borg take us into a very deep and thorough discussion of the meaning and the significance of the First Christmas, comparing Matthew’s and Luke’s Christmas Story of the birth of Jesus and the Kingdom Jesus represents to that of Augustus Caesar and his kingdom. That comparison is like light to darkness, and presents really two alternatives for the world, two choices by which we can live and move and have our being: bondage or liberation, exile or return, injustice or justice, violence or peace, falsehood or truth, death or life. To me, this is the real point of the Christmas narratives, and I don’t want to confuse the point and get into a debate about the virgin birth and whether it happened the way it is described in Matthew or Luke, or a combination of the two, lest we miss what they are saying through their stories; namely, the importance of the Kingdom of God that Jesus brings, and the choice we have to live differently.

In the sermon on the mount, from which our text comes, Jesus did not say, “You might be the salt of the earth” or you can become “the light of the world”, but rather, “you are salt, and you are light.”

Salt enhances the flavor of foods. So like salt, as a disciple of Jesus, you have the capacity to elicit goodness as you go about your life on this earth. In other words, your life lived as it should as a disciple, should have profound consequences for all the world, and most especially for those most vulnerable to the social and political dimensions of life, the little children.

In the sermon on the mount Jesus continues his litany of those blessed by his kingdom - for those poor in spirit, for those who mourn, for those who are meek, for those who are hungry, for those who thirst for righteousness, for the peacemakers, and for those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.
The danger for discipleship is that they may lose their capacity by forgetting that they are to disorder the present status quo by valuing those who are most vulnerable, those who are disposed, caring for those who suffer, seeking to do justice, show mercy, having integrity, being peacemakers, courageously standing up for what they believe in, and taking care of the little children. In other words, living by the values of an alternative kingdom - the Kingdom of Jesus. And disciples who do not engage in such practices that humanize life on earth will be like salt that has lost its taste or like the day that fades into night.

Light enables us to see things. It is a kind of energy that gives things color, helps vegetation to grow, provides solar power for electricity, and can be focused for specific uses such as laser surgery.

Like light, disciples have the overarching purpose of refracting God's light so that all people and all nations can know of God's justice and mercy. When disciples engage the world, it is like light. They enable diversity like light gives color. They nurture a healthy eco-friendly world, like light helps vegetation to crow. They generate policies for eco-justice as light provides solar power. They forgive and work for reconciliation in specific places, as light can be used as a laser to heal and mend. Jesus is the light of the world, and we, as disciples, are light as well.

My grandparents, Charlie and Bevie Thacker, from Danville, Arkansas, didn't salt their pork, so that they could eat salt; they salted the meat to preserve it, to keep it from going bad. And I don't turn the lights on at night to admire the fixture or even the light it gives off, or whether it is an incandescent or LED fixture, but to see where I am going, so that I can make it to the bathroom without breaking a leg.
The preservation and illumination qualities of salt and light are suggestive of the many ways in which those qualities, spilling out from our lives into all of creation, serve to fulfill Christ’s calling to us as disciples to care for the most vulnerable of all creation, symbolized by “the child”.

These words about salt and light are metaphorical expressions about discipleship - who we are and what we are doing in the Kingdom of God. It looks and sounds impossible. We can’t believe that we can live this alternative way, but it is possible, and more than possible. It is necessary for the children of the world and the future of humanity.

Isaiah 11:6 says of its dream of the coming Kingdom of God, “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” This dream of Isaiah for the world is ridiculous to the kingdoms of this world. It makes no sense to them, but how necessary it is for the ways of the Kingdom of God.

The vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached was a vision of non-violent just peace in all the world. Truly, this is the only way of salvation for the world, for the church, and most especially for the vulnerable of the world, symbolized by the children. “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, and a little child shall lead them.”

In a lecture series entitled “Reading the Gospels Afresh” by Brian McLaren that received from our daughter, Andee, for Christmas, Brian tells a story of an experience he had with his wife on the first Sunday after he left the pastorate to become a writer. He was touring the city of Sidney Australia, and heard that a place called “the Rock” was a cool place to visit. The weather was 74 degrees, the sun was shining and it was a perfect day. Then he heard a live band playing some down the street. McLaren loves live music and was attracted to what he was hearing. When he got to the place he found a 5 piece jazz band playing, as well as a lot of people dancing and having a wonderful time on this beautiful day. Then he noticed a little boy, a special needs little boy. The little boy had his eyes closed and was dancing right in front of the stage with others who were dancing as well, and with eyes close he mimicked the trumpet player as he played an imaginary trumpet. He was unaware when the saxophone player jumped off the stage to be right next to him and continued in song. He also was unaware when the trumpet player also joined him on his other side. And the music was just wonderful, and the scene was like the kingdom of God.

But you cannot even imagine the delight of that little boy when he realized just who was standing beside him on both sides, joining him in his music fantasy. Screams of delight just flooded the whole scene, and McLaren and his wife felt, “we’ve been in church today” and the Kingdom of God has come near!

Those singers and band chose an alternative kingdom, a kingdom that joins a little special needs child in his own personal journey.

If we are to have a future, if the children are to survive and thrive not just in our church but children all around the world the alternative Kingdom of God over against the Kingdom’s of this world must be lived out in the lives of disciples, a kingdom where there is liberation instead of bondage, of return rather than exile, of justice rather than injustice, of peace rather than violence, of truth rather than falsehood, of life rather than death in personal, political and social ways.

We can never know what will be the act by which we shed light in some dark space, by which we begin a healing process in a place of woundedness, but we can know that no faithful act of discipleship entered into with love is ever meaningless.

Jesus said, “let the little children come to me, for to such belongs the Kingdom of God.”

Isn’t it interesting that when God chose to reveal himself to us, it was through a child, the most vulnerable of society. You are the salt of the earth for all the children of the world. You are the light of the world to all the children of the world.

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