

**Sermon: "City on a Hill."  
Sunday, February 6, 2011  
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector  
Christ Church, Shaker Heights  
Epiphany V, Year A: Matthew 5:13-20**

"Jesus said, "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." (Matthew 5:13)

As many of you know I love to cook. And if there is one thing that cooks learn quickly it is that salt is often the fulcrum upon which the success or failure of a recipe rests. Too little and the dish is bland, having not reached its full flavor potential. Too much and the dish is inedible. (By the way, adding salt after the cooking process is completed never really brings out the flavor of the food like when it is added during the cooking process; flavors just don't meld well without it.) And removing too much salt from a recipe . . . well, good luck with that!

As a cook I am always intrigued by Jesus' speaking about salt losing its taste, its saltiness. I have never encountered salt that has lost its saltiness . . . ever; although coming up with a method to remove saltiness from an over-salted recipe would be great! "Dear Jesus, I sure could use some insight on this one. Please help me get the saltiness out of this stew before the company arrives!"

Salt in Jesus' time was not the well-refined table salt of our own day. In the first century, salt was obtained by evaporating salt marshes. This salt contained a lot of mineral impurities. It is this mineral compound that was used for salt in cooking and preserving food. Because of the impurities in it, the salt component would leach away in dampness thereby losing its saltiness.

This loss of saltiness meant that the salt had lost its savoriness, its ability to be fulfilling, flavorful, satisfying. As a cook I would say that salt that has lost its saltiness has lost its ability to be faithful to fulfilling its role in its relationship to the recipe.

Jesus is speaking about salt as a symbol of faithfulness as well. If you have lost your saltiness, he says, you have lost your ability to be faithful to your relationship with God. God desires us to be robust and savory as we meld and add flavor into the recipe of building up God's reign. Salt is symbolic of our fidelity and faithfulness to that relationship with God in making that recipe successful. If we have lost our saltiness the full flavor of that relationship fails to develop; it is bland.

Hence, what Jesus is saying is that we, his follower's, must possess the quality of perseverance. We, the salt in the recipe of building God's reign, cannot fall away from

our commitment. We must retain our "saltiness," our savoriness and robustness, committed to the creation of the finished recipe of the Kingdom.

In addition to being salt, Jesus also calls us to be light. "You are the light of the world," he says. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-15)

Calling us to be light in tandem with the call to be salt also intrigues me. Those of you who have attended an Easter Vigil service know that I use a bed of salt for igniting the first fire of Easter. The chemical addition of salt creates gorgeous flames of pale blues and pinks; salt helps make beautiful light.

Light of course, is the antidote to darkness. Light symbolizes hope and possibility in the face of despair and seemingly impossible circumstances. Jesus is the light of the world, the one who illumines and thereby banishes all darkness, all despair and hopelessness. So when Jesus calls us to be light, he is in fact calling us to follow his way of life. He is calling us to be faithful companions in building up God's reign by living the good news. Just like you can't hide a city on a hill, Jesus says, so we are not to hide the light of the good news that shines in us.

Students of American history will recognize the phrase "a city on a hill" from John Winthrop's famous sermon titled "A Model of Christian Charity." Winthrop's sermon was delivered in 1630 to hundreds of Puritans aboard the ship Arbella as it crossed the Atlantic toward the Massachusetts Bay Colony of which Winthrop would serve as governor.

"A Model of Christian Charity" described the ideas and plans to keep the Puritan society strong in faith as well as the struggles that they would have to overcome in the New World. Quoting Jesus, Winthrop used the now famous phrase "City upon a Hill," to describe the ideals to which the colonists should strive, in their new endeavor. As a consequence, Winthrop said, "the eyes of all people are upon us."

Winthrop's intent was to prepare the people for planting a new society in an uncertain environment. By being the light [and the salt] that Jesus called them to be, these new colonists would become a radiant city on a hill offering hope and possibility to others.

Christ Episcopal Church is being called to be a city on a hill. Well, actually we are on more of a gentle rise than a hill, but with our graceful spire we are major pinnacle in Shaker. God has been at work in this congregation for the past several years preparing us to play a significant role in the creation of a new society in the midst of an uncertain environment and concerns for the future here in Shaker Heights and the communities

we serve. This is certainly true in relation to the future of the crossroads district, as well as for the cultural, environmental, economic and social life of Shaker Heights and beyond. And most importantly this city on a hill that God is calling us to be will become the beating spiritual heart of the new thing that God is doing here.

Light from a city on a hill shines like a beacon. It is a city populated by people who radiate the light that comes from following Jesus. It is a city populated by salty people, robust and savory in their faithfulness to building up the reign of God. It is a community strong in faith as it encounters the struggles that occur as a new way of being, a new way of life emerges.

Christ Church is at a tipping point. That point which Malcolm Gladwell describes as, "the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point." I believe that the next two to three years will be critical ones for us. God has been moving, nudging, urging, us toward this critical mass. In many respects the past five plus years have been ones of internal preparation, laying the foundation of the new city in our community. It is a strong foundation constructed of outreach, education, artistic expression and most of all faith and worship of Jesus Christ. We are now ready to build on that sure foundation.

Today we welcome Unity Church into a space sharing arrangement. In another month Verb Ballets will establish their dance studio and offices as another part of building up the city. One year ago who would have thought either of these things possible? Welcoming both groups here is more than effective space utilization or improved economics, although it is both of these. Having both these organizations under our roof incarnates that we are a community that practices Christian hospitality in new ways. It manifests our radical compassion for those who find themselves in need. It tells others that we are coming to understand that the "faith community" that we are called to serve is much bigger than the people who are the members of this congregation and sitting in the pews, it is in fact everyone.

Make no mistake about it, just as Winthrop knew that the eyes of all people were upon the Puritans, the eyes of people in the City, the surrounding communities, the Diocese and other religious communities around us are beginning to take notice of the light shining here; they are noticing what is happening at Christ Church. They see the positive energy radiating from us. They see the renewed hope in a parish that not too long ago was supposed to be going belly-up. They see the potential of thinking outside the box, of being open to the creative wisdom of God's Spirit. In all of this they sense the possibilities of new life for themselves as they watch it unfolding here. We, my friends, are at a tipping point of living fully into God's reign.

We must continue to be the salt of the earth. We must continue to be light in the world. It is what Jesus calls us to do. We must not allow our salt to be leached or our light to be put under a bushel. This means we must not be deterred or discouraged by any

naysayers or the obstacles we will encounter. Our salt must be committed to the recipe to its completion.

As we tip forward into a bright future, God's reign continues to unfold in wondrous ways in this corner of the creation. And Christ Church emerges as a new city on a hill. Thanks be to God! Amen.