

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 5, 2017  
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### **Salt, Light and Structure**

Salt, light, righteousness and structure. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is encouraging those gathered to listen. It's a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount. He is encouraging us, too. He says we're good, and not to be shy about it. "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." He says we are salty and that we should keep being salty. And, his caveat is that we should do this by being righteous, even more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees. Well, that's a tall order. Let's think about this for a minute. What set the Scribes and Pharisees apart was, in fact, their strict adherence to the law. What frustrated Jesus, was when they adhered to the law with hardness of heart. He's telling us here that he has come to fulfill the law, the Spirit of the law. Yes, he will heal on the Sabbath because it's the right thing to do. Yes, he will let his disciples harvest grain on the Sabbath, because they were hungry. So he's living the Spirit of the law, not trying to sway people away from it, but cheering them and us on by saying, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." We appreciate and adhere to the Spirit of the law, the structure of the law, to give glory to God the Father.

I was given three choices of where to serve my parish field education last summer. After an interview with Denise and meeting Maude and Megan, Denise walked me into this room. The view from this sanctuary sealed my decision to serve at Holy Cross. It is profound to me to worship and pray here as we watch the wind in the trees, see the clouds in the sky and watch the seasons change. Our winter view today shows us the structure, the framework for blossoms and buds and leaves in the coming months. In winter, not only can we see structure but more light gets through to the forest floor and the roots of the trees.

Structure. Today is the fifth Sunday of Epiphany. There are three more Sundays - a total of eight in this liturgical season. So we are just past the middle of this season of light. Epiphany from the Greek *epiphainein* is generally translated "to reveal" The incarnate Christ was revealed to the wise men with the guidance of the light from a star. Light.

So, in winter, structure is revealed. More light gets through to the often shaded roots of trees and maybe to the roots of our hearts. We can see where we might plant, where we might prune to make the garden of our lives richer. We can make a plan, and build a structure to achieve the plan. And then sometimes, the Holy Spirit throws in something that is unexpected - and changes the structure of our lives to serve God's purposes. I've got a lot of those stories, and I suppose you do too. So I'll just share one today.

About 15 years ago, I got a phone call from a fellow parishioner at St. Mary's Episcopal in Arlington where I was a member. I can still remember the person's voice on the line, saying that the church was asking several families to act as mentors for 18 Sudanese refugees. She had thought that one young man in this group might be a good fit for our family and that a 6 month mentorship would get the young man settled in Arlington. After that time, the mentorship would end. "Pray about it" she said. Right. (always, scary when someone says that!!!)

And, I did pray about it later, but I knew when I hung up the phone my family would do this and, most importantly, I knew it was a lifelong commitment. The Holy Spirit was pretty clear about this. No singing angels, but light shined on the obvious decision to make. The structure of our lives was going to be messed up - altered - as we helped out Santino, who had spent 13 years in refugee camps and had walked some 2,000 miles as a child fleeing utter horror in what is now Southern Sudan.

So we met him and we became friends. We saw his face when he entered his first grocery store. We introduced him to cooking on a stove. Electricity was a big adventure. We taught him about paying taxes and my husband, Burleigh, taught him to drive. (The reason for additional gray hair.) Santino worked two jobs while going to school to get his high school diploma. But, when the economic downturn came and his 4 roommates moved to areas of the country where the cost of living is much less, it became obvious to me (again, the Holy Spirit working) that he should move into our guest room. My daughters were 14 and 7 years old at the time. He stayed with us in our home for the next 5 years. He became an American citizen and now lives in Alexandria. He still works two jobs and takes classes at NOVA toward his college degree.

What's the point of this story and what does it have to do with salt, light, and legalities of "the law"?

First, our ongoing experience with Santino changed the structure, the laws, of my life both practically and spiritually so that more light could get to the roots of my heart. Before Santino learned to drive, with my youngest in her car seat, the two of us would pick him up from high school and take him over to his day job. We did this to solve a practical conundrum. The bus schedule wouldn't get him from the school to his job site on time. We learned many lessons about the working poor.

Spiritual gifts were many. We got to see hundreds of kids from countries all over the world rushing from their classes out into the city. We got to hear how bizarre geometry seemed to this man from the Dinka tribe in Africa. My daughters got to see that being with Santino was a normal part of our lives, not an exception.

He continues to change my life spiritually in many, many ways bringing both salt and light to me. When he was living with us, one morning I heard him singing. When he came out of his room, I asked him about it. He said that when he was sad he would sing the psalms from his prayer book for as long as it took until he was happy again. Imagine - this from a young man who got daily phone calls from people in the refugee camps asking for help, because surely the streets in America are paved with gold. And, there he was in my house, singing the psalms, his personal eternal light shining God's glory through his voice, through the saltiness of his faith.

Second, you never know when you are going to be called on to become a bit more salty, filled with the rich flavor that is the work of Christ. You never know when the Holy Spirit will prompt you into action. You don't know when you are going to be called on to hold your lamp up high, moving it out of the theological bookcase, and using your experience as a message for God's compassion and glory. Honestly, I am somewhat uncomfortable talking about this because it sounds like self-promotion, but I am trying to lift the bushel off of the light of my experience so that you might see that the Holy Spirit works through all of us, through each of us.

Some of you are living with children or grandchildren who have special needs. Others have family members who are challenged economically, who aren't making it financially. Some are

serving young children and aging parents at the same time. Our Gospel says to lift the basket off of the light you are nurturing. Tell others that you are sustained in your endeavors by God's grace. Say it. "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." When your strength falters, sing the psalms until you are strong again. Take advantage of the light on other lampstands to light your way. If our saltiness has grown mild, if the winter is upon you and branches feel bare, allow the light to shine on you. Sometimes, all we have to do to let our light shine, to help in fulfilling the Spirit of the law, is to answer the phone when it rings and say yes to the opportunity to serve God in ways we never imagined.