

**5 Epiphany – Year A – February 6, 2011**  
**Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20**  
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I love salty foods, especially chips. So many of us these days are trying to keep our salt intake low, in order to keep our blood pressure under control, but that wasn't always the case. In fact, in ancient times the lack of salt in a person's diet was a more common problem. Salt was so precious that it was used as means of payment. The word "salary" comes from the Latin word for salt. Our bodies can't function properly without salt. Just by virtue of our humanity, we are all salty people. Who hasn't tasted a salty tear, or a few drops of salty blood after we cut our finger? Even our sweat is salty.

As for light, it's said that when Robert Louis Stevenson was a boy, in the days when the streets were lit by gas lamps, he watched an old lamp lighter igniting the lamps as he went down the street. Stevenson said to his nurse, "I am watching a man put holes in the darkness." Likewise, John Ruskin watched a lamplighter light his lamps and said, "Now that is what I mean by being a Christian. You ought to be able to see where [we have] been by the lights that [we leave] burning behind."

Salt and light are the two metaphors we hear in the Gospel reading today. Each describes our call to discipleship, and Jesus uses each in a new way as he continues His revelatory teaching of the Law and the Prophets. Let's look at salt first. In the context of everyday life, we already know how important salt is. Additionally, salt adds flavor to bland food. It is a preservative for meat, significantly slowing down the normal process of decay. The Egyptians used salt in the mummification process. Salt also makes us thirsty. It would be hard to eat a bag of chips without having a drink handy. In the purposeful and deeper reality of our lives in Christ Jesus, our saltiness gives us the capacity to preserve and elicit goodness. An easy experiment proves how well salt acts as an agent of conductivity. The experiment creates an electrical circuit with wires from a cup of salt water, linked to a battery and a light bulb. The test is first to try to light the bulb with distilled water. When that fails, we gradually add salt to the cup and watch as the bulb glows dimly, and then brighter as more salt is added. As disciples of Jesus, we act as salty agents, bathed in the waters of Baptism, with the power to light up the world with the love of God. If we lose our saltiness, or if our salt becomes too diluted in the chaotic waters of the world, our capacity to convey God's power and light to the world is also reduced, because the vital, life-giving connection between God's power, salt and light is lost.

In the history of Judaism, which is a part of our own history of faith, salt is a symbol of God's covenant. Salt that has lost its saltiness is equivalent to being faithless and risking rejection before the judgment seat of God. In other words, as the prophets warned, there are consequences to living a life that has lost its flavor and thirst for God. A lack of mindfulness and attention to God's commands to live in humility, right relationship, and faithfulness, according to God's love and justice, is a diminished life in God's sight. The Beatitudes that we heard last week express the same kind of challenges for faithful discipleship. Our saltiness has broad significance, not just in bringing light into the world, but preserving the Good News of Jesus Christ, and all the goodness and blessings that we bring to others in Jesus' name. The gospel message is like giving away valuable salt, it helps others to see the purpose and value in a life of faith. In our spiritual lives, and our faith in action, adding our saltiness to the world also makes others thirsty. When I was going through formal discernment for Holy Orders, I had to describe my faith a lot to others in all kinds of interview situations, even as they observed my life in other ways. Many times as I shared, those listening got a little teary-eyed as the Holy Spirit helped me to speak, and helped them to hear. As a result, one of the very best gifts I received in return was to hear the words, "I want what you've got." One of the greatest blessings of all our lives is the capacity to share our stories of faith with others. All we're doing is pouring out the salty words that the Holy Spirit gives us, and making others thirsty for a closer relationship with God in Christ Jesus. Through faithful discipleship, we're not just transforming the world with our saltiness, but constantly being transformed ourselves.

If our saltiness is highly personal and integral to our lives of faith, being light has more to do with the call, challenge, and focus of the Body of Christ, the community of faith, and the role of the church in the world. In and through *the* Light of the world, Jesus Christ, we are enabled to see truth, and we are empowered to help all things grow to the glory of God's name. In God's history of salvation, Israel is charged to be a light to the nations. As followers of Jesus, being light is our invitation to actively participate in the work of healing and reconciliation begun by Jesus, and to fulfill our own ministries in His name. Our faith in action brings the light of Christ to stimulate new growth, reveal God's love to the world in the lightness of our being and doing, and to show us all the way.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus critiques the way that the scribes and the Pharisees have interpreted the Law and the Prophets. His concern is like the difference between being a lighthouse, and a lamp. Israel is charged to be a light to the nations, and yet in fear of losing her identity in the midst of a sea of gentiles and pagan worshippers, Jesus tells us that the leaders have become instead like guardians of the light, warning people to stay away, rather than showing them the way. In other words, the leaders in the Temple are teaching everyone to be like lighthouses. They are keeping the light of God imprisoned in a huge glass cage, moving in the same circle, but otherwise immovable. Their rigidity keeps the light safe and separate from the rest of the world. It tells Jesus that for those seeking a sign, a light in the darkness, or looking for direction like ships in the stormy sea of life; we would avoid the lighthouse for fear of being wrecked on the dangerous rocks. For the Judean leaders, Jesus and His teachings are like those dangerous rocks. Jesus and His teachings are a stumbling block to them. As followers of Christ, we believe that Jesus is, as the Psalmist (Psalm 118:22) says, "The stone that the builders rejected [who] has become the chief cornerstone."

On the other hand, the light that Jesus brings into the world and the light that dwells in each of us because of His righteousness are like a multitude of lamps spanning the globe. This is dynamic light that moves and grows, that kindles other lights as we share our faith, and leaves bright spots burning around us through our deeds of love in Christ's name. Our lamps are also a source of heat, a flame of passion for our Lord that grows as our faith grows. When we gather together to worship the Lord or to fulfill our mission in community, our lights compound and become like a huge beacon of God's love offering a light of welcome, and shining the path towards Jesus. The light of Jesus' love is meant for everyone, it cannot be hidden or suppressed, but should be passed along. For the light of God to be seen most clearly we need to bring it, send it, and take it to where it is darkest. That is a twofold task – to bring light into the darkest parts of the world – the places where there is violence and oppression, where there is fear and injustice, where the unloved and unlovable in the eyes of world await the Good News of love and freedom in Christ. The other task is to bring light into our inner darkness, like the shadowy corners of our hearts and minds. Either way it helps to be faithful in prayer and the reading of God's word, so that the light of God can continue to heal us, bless us, and stimulate new growth within us, and around us.

Imagine what we can do as we bring the light of God into the world, punching holes in the darkness. Imagine the difference we can make as we journey in faith lighting lamps through our words and deeds. Priest, Jan L. Richardson, describes the relationship between salt, light and power this way. "It is not might that will finally save us. It is power like salt, giving ourselves over to the flavor of the holy; like light indiscriminate, caressing each face it happens to meet."

Amen.