

Malcolm Clemens Young  
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X6  
5 Epiphany (Year A) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist  
Sunday 5 February 2017

Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12)  
Ps 112:1-9 (10)  
1 Cor. 2:1-12 (13-16)  
Mathew 5:13-20

### **The Saltiness of Grace**

“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world” (Mt. 5).

The contemporary theologian James Alison (1959-) asks us to imagine two groups of scientists. The first have a whole library of maps with diagrams and tables of figures. They take turns looking through a powerful telescope at distant galaxies and stars. They describe what they see and make minor changes to the maps.<sup>1</sup>

The second group of scientists stands on the rim of a great crater on the surface of the earth trying to figure out what happened. They ask about the dimensions and speed of the object that produced this and about the consequences for life on earth.

Alison says that theologians are most like this second group. Theology is a distinctively Christian discipline. It presupposes a happening, a breakthrough, an interruption that has ongoing consequences. Furthermore it depends on the idea that this impact is not a blind collision but an act of communication from God. This means the theologian is involved not merely as an objective outsider commenting on what happened but is “part of the communication from the inside.”

Another way to put this is that we are involved not just in observation but in what Alison calls “undergoing.” It is not merely what we see but the self, the one who is doing the seeing, is changing. In his words we are undergoing God.

I would propose a third metaphor. I would say that theologians are more like the scientists who read weather maps and open ocean buoy readings. They study vast stretches of the sea so that they can predict the wave energy, the surfing conditions in their own neighborhood. They follow tremendous forces that are happening right now and affecting everything around us even with life and death consequences. This power shapes how we plan our day. In the salty ocean we can touch the energy of a storm that originated 5,000 miles away.

Regardless of the picture we use to describe this life-changing communication, it is the reason we are here this morning. We hope to encounter the force that fashions the galaxies and the winter storms. We seek the Holy One who lies closer to us than we are to ourselves, who calls us each by name.

Last week I mentioned the parallels that Matthew suggests between Moses the Lawgiver and Jesus. On a mountaintop Jesus teaches his disciples about the blessedness of the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and all those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Today we have a continuation of this teaching.

He goes on to say very simply, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored... You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill

cannot be hid... In the same way let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5).

1. This morning as we try to understand God's communication to us let me begin by examining our saltiness as individuals and then go on to our ministry together. According to Jesus this saltiness, this light, is not something that you have to earn or get. You already have it. You can no more hide the light that comes from God than you can disguise San Francisco perched on all these hills and visible from miles away.

This might lead you to ask about the salt that loses its taste. The Greek word that Matthew uses for salt that loses its saltiness is *moraino*. We accurately translate it as tasteless but more frequently it means foolish. You might recognize it already as linguistically related for our word "moron." Many of us have experienced the foolishness of not being what we really are.

Our homework for this week is to really consider the question, "What is my saltiness?" "What makes me unique?" "How can I shine?" Sometimes what embarrasses us most about our self becomes our real gift to the world. It might be hard to imagine but our suffering can even end up helping others to heal.

This year our theme at the Cathedral is "the Gift." In February we are especially considering the gift of love. Last week I asked for your help in how we can become more aware of this gift.

On Friday in response I heard from a woman who told me that she recently took a psychological test and was surprised to learn that her principal strength is love. This made her re-evaluate her professional life. My friend said that as a child in church she learned to pray for her enemies. Over time this practice evolved to the point that now, when she is faced with someone who makes her angry or afraid, she imagines, in her words, opening her heart and "shining a warm golden beacon of love onto them."

Although she began her career in a very technical field she has become known for her skill at solving tremendously complicated problems (like contract, employment and property disputes, etc.). Probably none of her colleagues realize it, but her ability to bring peace to contentious places comes from a practice of prayer. With the level of fear and anger we are now experiencing in our public life she says, "Somehow love will have to be the catalyst for the solution, but it will take all of us sending our love into the dark places."<sup>2</sup>

2. "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world" (Mt. 5). The Greek word for you is plural in this passage. It means you all, you as a collective, you as the church. This week two friends from Grace asked me the same question. What should we as a congregation do next in the face of new dehumanizing government laws and policies?

In my last year of seminary I took a leadership class in the School of Government. Perhaps my teacher Ronald Heifetz's (1951-) most important lesson had to do with the distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges. Technical problems might be as simple as changing a bicycle tire or as complex as landing a person on the moon. They involve applying rules to problems that have been solved in the past. You identify the problem, gather the resources you need and then apply best practices to solving it.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, there is no roadmap to resolving an adaptive challenge. No one knows ahead of time what should be done, because fixing the problem requires the organization to address conflicts in values, beliefs and behaviors. You cannot just do a better job of what was done before and succeed. The people need to work together to create a solution that does not yet exist.

I would not be surprised if my old teacher were to say that leaders in Washington will make our situation worse by treating adaptive challenges (like healthcare, immigration, trade, etc.) as technical problems. In the face of this unprecedented change, what we do next as followers of Jesus is an adaptive challenge. As we begin to figure this out together I want to point out two kinds of saltiness that characterize Grace Cathedral.

An immigrant named John Leonard ver Mehr (1809-1886) founded Grace as one of the first churches west of the Mississippi River. He loved learning and children. He devoted his life to starting new schools and churches. From the beginning Grace has been both modern and traditional like our steel-reinforced concrete gothic-style Cathedral (with its modern lectern and ancient pulpit). One of our most distinguishing features has been our embrace of social change that seeks to include a wider range of people.

Two weeks ago in the Martin Luther King, Jr. Forum the Stanford professor Clay Carson pointed out that before the 1960's tremendous numbers of people in the world were not even full citizens of their own countries.<sup>4</sup> King recognized that the Civil Rights movement was far larger in scope than most people imagined at the time. This value lies at the heart of our life together too. It explains why ministry to people with HIV / AIDS and advocating marriage equality and full inclusion of all people mean so much to us.

Finally, our saltiness involves our commitment to beauty and the experience of transcendence. The mystic Richard Rohr distinguishes between dualistic thinking and contemplative consciousness. Dualistic thinking means seeing reality from the perspective of a detached and individual ego. It involves comparison, oppositions and differentiation. It asks the question "what's in it for me?"<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, a contemplative approach to the world means feeling fully united to God in love and experiencing the world as a gift. We lose our consciousness of being separate from the world when we look at someone we love, or watch a child playing, or hear the sound of running water. Although for much of our life we tend to just skim along the surface, we can cultivate an openness to receiving this gift. Grace Cathedral, with its smell of incense, the whoosh of cable cars, the light through the stained glass, our singing and companionship makes this a kind of instrument for uniting us to God.

We all could share our own examples of the salty divinity we see in the people here and of the light that we all share. Last Sunday I met a man in his thirties after the first church service he had ever attended in his life. I asked him "what did you notice?" He was flustered as he searched for a response. Finally he answered with just one word. "Unity. I love the unity."

Even as the world around us seems to be deteriorating, even before we know just what we will do about it, we have found life in this mysterious communication from God. This

message radiating out across the centuries, like waves from a storm, does not merely inform us. It changes us. We are undergoing it together.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> James Alison, "Of Concavities and Tent Poles," *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (NY: Continuum, 2006) 1.

<sup>2</sup> She went on to make another observation. She cited Gary Chapman's book *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*. Each of us have different ways of expressing regard, affection and love. These include: gift giving, quality time, affirming words, acts of service and physical touch. My friend said that it can be hard if a family member is aching to hear words of love from a family member who is already expressing love through acts of service. We easily miss the love that people are already bringing into our life and inadvertently disguise the way we express our care. Email 3 February 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1994) 22, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Clayborne Carson, "Remarks," Martin Luther King Panel, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 15 January 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rohr, "Dualistic and Nondual Thinking," *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation*, 28 January – 3 February 2017. [https://cac.org/the-dualistic-mind-2017-01-29/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=2017-02-04%20DM&utm\\_content=2017-02-04%20DM+CID\\_2cde4efd45f6cdb5b53cc9251ad79f95&utm\\_source=Campaign%20Monitor%20Google%20Analytics&utm\\_term=Sunday](https://cac.org/the-dualistic-mind-2017-01-29/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2017-02-04%20DM&utm_content=2017-02-04%20DM+CID_2cde4efd45f6cdb5b53cc9251ad79f95&utm_source=Campaign%20Monitor%20Google%20Analytics&utm_term=Sunday)