

Year A, 5 Epiphany
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Jesus speaks encouraging words to his disciples, "You are salt; you are light". Salt has its own taste but we don't sit down and eat it by the handful. We do, however, sprinkle it on other foods in order to enhance their flavor. Light for its own sake is blinding, but when it is directed towards something else, it is a highlighter, enabling us to see and appreciate other things around us. Both salt and light make other things better. Salt brings out the best flavor in other foods. Light makes daily living possible. Without salt and light, our world would be unrecognizable to us as we currently know it. Without the disciples, the movement of Jesus would not be much of a force.

At this moment in U.S. history we find our nation deeply divided. The talk has changed from "we" to "us" and "them". Our side is good and the other is misguided if not outright bad. It used to be that friends could hold opposing political views but keep them in tension for the greater good of preserving the friendship. Sadly it seems those days are past.

More than one friendship has ended over our scorched earth politics. Friends this is not good for anyone, and it grieves me. If we are the disciples we claim to be, then it is incumbent upon us to be the salt and light that Jesus has sent into the world. The nation, if not the world, needs us to set a loving example.

First, we need to remember that we have already won the ultimate victory. Jesus has defeated death. Because of our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus, we need not hold onto our weapons. This victory claims a hold on every aspect of our being, including the political. Politics is important, but it is not the ultimate prize. That moniker still belongs to salvation. When we disorient the order of things by prioritizing politics over salvation, we walk away from the victory that is already ours and re-fight a battle that has already been won. The result is meaningless carnage. When we remember the victory, when we lay claim again to the wonderful gift that Jesus has given us. It is something that plays long beyond term limits- eternal salvation.

Second, we might take a bit of an audiological assessment- how's our hearing? I am not talking about how we hear or listen to the people with whom we already agree. How's it going for people outside of my bubble of communication? If I am already not listening to them, how could I possibly know?

Here is a good exercise for you. Think about that old friend with whom you have recently experienced some tension. Invite them and a third party to join you for a bit of conversation. Pick some topic about which you and your friend disagree in principle. It might be political or a very important question that lies near to the heart of every New Orleanian- can I, in good conscience, cheer for the Atlanta Falcons to win the Super Bowl? All joking aside, the topic is less important than the process.

Have the third person sit away from you for the first part of the conversation. In this first part your friend makes his or her defense and then you make yours. Then, invite the third person to come and join you and each of you must make the case for the other's point of view. That's right, you must defend a cause you do not support. Doing so demonstrates to your friend that you have heard him or her. In listening, you will demonstrate that your love.

Love does not require that I agree on every topic or issue. It does mean that I will defend your point of view when you are not able to do so for yourself. How different might the world look if there was more of this behavior and less severing of relationships?

Some years ago the late author Marcus Borg, a leader of the liberal movement of the church, entered into a traveling debate with a leading conservative, N.T. Wright, who later became the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. The point of the exercise was to model that individual Christians could engage other Christians in difficult conversations without violating their own integrity and while also maintaining Christian love for the other. In this way these men were salt and light.

When we cut ourselves off from others, we become like salt that has been contaminated and is no longer good for its intended use and is thrown out and trampled underfoot. When we refuse to listen to others beyond our own tribe we are like a light that has been hidden under the bushel. The light shines but is of no benefit to the other.

Salt and light are both good and helpful and both make the world better. You are salt and light. Go and make the world better. This is your calling; this is your gift! *Amen.*