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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

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5 Epiphany, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112:1-10

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Matthew 5:13-20

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A few days ago I was making some oatmeal for one of my kids and I dutifully followed the package instructions: half a cup of oatmeal, a cup of water, and a pinch of salt.

And she asked me: why do you put salt into oatmeal? Good question, right? It's supposed to be sweet. You eat it with brown sugar and cinnamon. And of course the answer is that a little salt brings out the flavor of whatever it's cooked with. That's within reason, of course. There's such a thing as too much salt, both for taste and for our health. Nobody wants to bite into a spoonful of salty, salty oatmeal. But in the right proportion, what salt does isn't so much to make things salty as to bring out their flavors, to make every ingredient just a little more vivid, a little more *itself*.

Light is like that too. We need light to see by, but what we look at mostly isn't the light itself but the things it illuminates. Nobody wants to look straight into the sun or a bright light bulb. Nobody goes to a museum or an art gallery to admire the lighting. But without the lighting it's impossible to see the art we came there for. Today as Jesus tells his followers, which is also to say he tells us, that we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, I think those images have a lot to say to us about how we show up in the world as Christians. I think both these images teach us that our role in public life isn't about separatism; nor is it about domination. Let me expand on that.

There are some forms of Christianity that think Christians ought to be more or less separatist: to come apart from the world by turning away from the corrupting influences of a dangerous, secular, and maybe even unredeemable society, and to form instead a pure enclave of Christian culture. But if we are to be salt and light as Jesus says, then separatism isn't an option. Because the vocation of light, as Jesus says, isn't to hide under a bushel basket, but to light up the world. And the vocation of salt isn't to stay pure and unmixed in a salt shaker on the shelf, but to get mixed up in the food so the food can be fully alive.

There are also some forms of Christianity that think the role of Christians isn't to come apart from the world, but rather to take it over: to dominate it. And I dare say that these voices of domination are louder in our culture right now than the separatist ones. We hear today not only from church leaders but also from political leaders who advocate the narrative that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, rather than a nation with freedom of religious practice and freedom from any one established religion. We see leaders working to favor Christians over people of other faiths in refugee admissions, or to enshrine Christian symbols on public property, or sending messages about "our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" through the communications accounts of official government agencies. Some church leaders even speak of the so-called Seven Mountains of society that Christians should seek to dominate: religion, education, family, media, entertainment, business, and government.

But I never heard Jesus tell his disciples to go out and rule. Last week in the Beatitudes I heard him tell us blessed are the meek and blessed are the poor in spirit. As Paul reminds us in today's epistle, we preach a Christ who did not seek to take hold of the government authorities but who was crucified by them. And when Jesus tells us this week that our role is to be salt and light in the world, part of what I hear is that our role is *not* to quote-unquote "Christianize" the world by dominating it like a quart of salt dumped into a bowl of oatmeal. Instead it's to *bless* the world and make it a better place, more itself, more alive.

Yes, as Christians we should be involved in public life. Our voting, our volunteering, our giving, our advocacy, should all come out of a conscience formed by Christ. But the goal isn't to seek our own benefit and it certainly isn't to dominate. It's to bless and serve our neighbors and the world, in the name of the one who came not to be served but to serve.

We get some guidance for what that looks like in the words we heard today from the prophet Isaiah where God criticizes the people of God for doing *religion* without doing *righteousness*. Do you want to really practice your faith, God asks? Then here's what to do: break the chains of those oppressed and let them go free. Share your bread with hungry people. Shelter homeless people. Clothe naked people. That's the religion God is looking for. It's right there in our text.

Now all the things God mentions in this passage are *collective* things. This is not a passage directed at an individual to get them to give alms to an occasional hungry person. This is a passage directed at a society and it is about how to treat one another in the plural, in the aggregate. It is about the kind of society God wants to see—and God does *not* say it is a society where everyone always goes to my temple and prays my prayers and puts up symbols of my religion. God says it is a society where the poor, and specifically the poor, are treated with justice and mercy.

And I believe that is an orienting principle for us too as Christians as we seek to orient our public life. Not that our goal is to make the society around us a *Christian* nation, but that our goal is to make it a *just and compassionate* nation; and that a constant benchmark for that is what the effect of our choices is not for ourselves, but for the common good, and most especially for those who are poor, for workers and orphans and widows and strangers and those without homes.

We will have differences about exactly how to do that. We live in a complex world and being a Christian doesn't make anybody an expert in economics, or criminal justice policy, or education policy. There will be those who think larger or smaller government programs or higher or lower tax rates will work better for the common good and for those who are poor. There is plenty of room to disagree and to be open to new learning on exactly *how* to promote prosperity and compassion and justice for everyone and particularly those in greatest need. What there is never room for, for Christians, is a politics of selfishness that rejoices in redistributing resources upward while exploiting those below, or a politics of cruelty that rejoices in humiliating one's opponents, or a politics of violence that rejoices in death and destruction.

Nor does that mean we stop proclaiming our faith and just become a social service agency. Our hunger for justice comes precisely out of our faith in Jesus Christ, and in his God and Father, in whose holy image all people are made and for whom every single person has infinite worth. There are plenty of people out there who need to hear the good news of God's love and whose lives would be made better by learning to practice this beautiful way of life that is the Christian path. But what it does mean is that we share our faith not by coercion or the levers of the state, God forbid, but by the conviction of our words and the example of our lives.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. This week as you're sent forth from this service I pray that you will know yourself as salt and light, and go forth not to withdraw from the world, nor to dominate it, but to love it, and serve it, and make it more alive.