

5 Epiphany Sermon  
The Rev. Megan Dembi

When I was little, my father would often tell me an old Romanian fairytale that goes something like this. In a faraway land there was a king who had three daughters. Every year on the king's birthday there would be a huge feast in celebration. And it was the tradition that during the feast, each of the king's daughters would stand up and tell everyone assembled how much they loved their father the king. So the appointed time comes during the feast, and the first daughter stands up and says, "Father, I love you as much as I love sugar." The king and everyone in attendance nods in appreciation. Sugar is sweet and delicious. This daughter clearly loves her father very much. The second daughter stands and says, "Father, I love you as much as I love honey." Once again, the king and everyone in attendance expressed their approval. Honey, too, is sweet and delicious. This daughter, also, clearly loves her father very much. Then it is the third daughter's turn to speak. She stands up and says, "Father, I love you as much as I love salt." The king and those in attendance are aghast! Salt is so bitter! What an insult for this girl to compare her father to salt. In his anger, the king banishes this daughter from his kingdom. Saddened, the daughter leaves never to be seen again.

The following year, on the king's birthday, there is once again another celebration. The kitchen staff began preparing weeks in advance for this special feast. Once again the king, his two remaining daughters, and hundreds of guests in attendance begin to enjoy the banquet. The king sits at the head table and begins to eat. He starts with some bread, makes a disappointed face, and sets it down. He tastes the potatoes, and is dissatisfied. He decides to try some turkey, but again, is disappointed. Suddenly, the king begins to weep. All in attendance are shocked, what could be wrong? So his two daughters ask, "Father, what is the matter? Why are you crying?" And the king says, "I finally understand. Every year my birthday banquet is filled with delicious foods, but this year the food is bland and tasteless." The daughters are confused. Is bland food a reason to cry? The king continues, "The food is bland because there is something missing. It is because there is no salt." The king finally understood that his third daughter, the daughter whom he banished, actually loved him very deeply. She loved him as much as she loved salt, without which the banquet was bland and tasteless.

This story can help shed light on the gospel reading for today. Jesus tells those who are assembled, "You are the salt of the earth." Yet if we think of salt on its own, salt really isn't that great. It's bitter. It tastes too strong. You can't really eat it by itself. But salt, when used properly, can improve almost any food. Salt makes food better. How awful would French fries be if we didn't put salt on them? How tasteless would chicken be if we didn't add salt to it? Even most desserts have at least a bit of salt in them to enhance their flavors. That is what Jesus is telling us our identity is. We are to use our abilities and our knowledge as Christians, not to focus on ourselves, but to make other things better. In this way we are also to be the light of the world. Lights do not shine for their own sake, but to illuminate other things. That is why we don't place a lamp under a bushel basket after lighting it. We are to use our abilities and our knowledge as Christians, not for our own sakes, but to bring light to the darkness in the world. In these ways we follow the commandments that Christ has given us.

Though this is the work we are called to do, I believe Christians often lose sight of this. Though we are called to do so much more than simply profess Christ as the Son of God and the savior and redeemer of the world, many Christians view holding these beliefs as adequate. They don't truly believe that their behaviors, values, and beliefs need to reflect the teachings of Christ—they think everything is fine as long as they proclaim Christ to be Lord and proclaim themselves to be Christians. The people of God in the Isaiah reading are falling into the same trap that many of us Christians are. They are seeking after God thinking that God is on their side. They are worshipping God, they are

keeping the festivals—so they believe that God will judge them to be righteous and judge their enemies to be unrighteous. Yet God points out their hypocrisy. They're willing to follow the commandments of God that are simple for them to follow, that don't require any real sacrifice. Yet God forces them to look at the error of their ways. God pronounces judgment against the people, pointing out that they fast to serve their own interest. They do not fast with the goal of repenting or following God's commands. They fast only to fight with others, and to oppress their workers. And this does not follow God's commands. And God tells the people in no uncertain terms what commandments they are supposed to be following—to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into their houses. It is then that the people will be doing the will of God. Not when they simply claim to be God's people.

We are the salt of the earth. But if we claim to be Christian yet only follow the commands that are easy, the commands that let us stay in our comfort zones, then we are not truly following God's commands. We can continue to call ourselves Christians, yet are no different from those people whom God condemns in the Isaiah reading. If we forsake the commandments given to us by God, we have lost our saltiness and are no longer good for anything. We are the light of the world, but if we allow our lights to remain hidden, if we do not shed light on the darkness happening in this world—if we do not bring good in the midst of evil, if we do not bring justice to the oppressed, then we are not shining our light before others and are useless. We can call ourselves Christians and talk about Jesus all we want, but if we are not following God's commands in our lives, then we are not being the salt of the earth, we are not being the light of the world, and we are not living as Christ calls us to live.

Many Christians throughout the ages, including today, justify not following God's commandments due to fear. Many of us are afraid. We're afraid to use our talents and our treasure to help others for fear we will not have enough for ourselves. We fear treating others as our neighbors lest they do not return our kindness. We fear freeing the oppressed lest we become oppressed ourselves. But nowhere in scripture are the people of God given permission to break God's commands due to fear. We cannot act as the salt of the earth or the light of the world when we're too afraid to interact with others, or too scared to leave the safety of our bushel baskets. We are told over and over again in scripture to not be afraid. Because it is when we act out of fear that we betray our faith. Peter, fearful of how the crowds would react to him, denied Christ three times after Christ's arrest.

Christ never promised us safety and security in this life. And Christ never commanded us to seek safety and security for ourselves. But he DID command us to care for the poor, the sick, and the prisoner—to treat even the foreigner as our neighbor, and to act out of love above all else. We cannot turn away from our Christian morals, values, and commandments and excuse those actions away by claiming we feared for our safety. No, Christ never promised us safety and security in this life. But Christ is very clear on what we must be willing to give up if we truly wish to follow him. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Though we are not promised safety and security in this life, we are promised those things in the life to come. And we are told that those who follow God's commands and teach others to do the same will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Let us truly act as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, seeking to make the world a better place and bringing light to the darkness we see around us. Let us set aside our fears and follow Christ's commands in this life, knowing that we will be with Christ in the life eternal. Amen.