

Thermometers and Thermostats

Salt of the earth.
City on a hill.
Light of the world.

And how about one more metaphor: thermometers and thermostats.
There's an important difference between thermometers and thermostats.

A thermometer reflects its environment. It shows (or tells) what the temperature is. If it's hot outside, it says it's hot; if it's cold, it says it's cold; it exerts no influence on what's around it - rather it is influenced by its environment.

But not a thermostat. It sets the temperature, it changes things. And in this way a thermostat has power, influencing its environment, determining whether it will be hot or cold.

So the question is...what are you? A thermometer, or a thermostat? It's a great question!
Jesus says we're thermostats in today's reading when he says:

You are the salt of the earth;

You are the light of the world.

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

Think about it - Jesus tells us - "You are the salt of the earth..." And again, "You are the light of the world."

What an incredible thing that is! What an incredible gift! Somehow - because of who God has made us to be; somehow - because we follow Jesus, we are made into salt - into light - for the world. Thermostats if you will.

And that might be the most important thing that God does through us, when we live by our faith.

Think for a moment of the people who have influenced you, the people who because of their love and care for you, inspired you to believe in God and his love for you and for all people.

Did they light up your life? Did they bring new zest into your life? Maybe they still do.
Did they influence your lives with their care and concern and honesty, just as the presence of Jesus changed the life of Peter and John and James and the other disciples?

We as a church - as individuals gathered together into one body - are here today because the light of Christ has come into the world, and the lives of others, and our lives. As you Bob said last week - we are blessed; especially those who by the world's standards don't seem blessed.

And so the question follows, Now what? What are we going to do with that blessing?
And Jesus' answer is - share it!

In this way, the Christian faith ought to be a wildly infectious disease. When you get a good case of it everyone around gets it too. But the thing is - many people try to cure it by stifling it, ignoring it, hiding it - by living like thermometers rather than like thermostats.

Reginald Bibby, a sociologist in Canada, studies religion and society. In one of his books he examined the various churches in Canada; he polled church folk, and he polled a large number of non-Christians, and discovered something interesting. He discovered that on almost all major social and political issues Christians did not differ in their opinions from non-Christians.

Bibby suggests that the reason that the Christian church is declining in North America is because it does not offer anything that anyone else does not offer. He points out that the very things that make the church unique, many churches don't talk about. He laments that they would rather talk about psychology and well-being than about faith, about how we can become better people than about how we can grow in our faith.

We need to hear his critique but hear it in the context of God's blessings declared and our identity as beloved children of God. Remember the beatitudes last week – Blessed are you... nine times...Blessed ARE you.

And then today. You ARE the salt of the earth – You ARE the light of the world.

A colleague of mine tells of when he was in graduate school studying for his PhD, one of his teachers would regularly address him as "Dr. Lewis." Eventually it made him uncomfortable enough that he said to his professor, "I haven't earned my doctorate yet. I don't think you should call me that." "Dr. Lewis," he patiently responded, "in the African-American church we are not content to call you what you are, but instead call you what we believe you will be!"

Blessing. Unexpected, unsettling, nearly inconceivable, yet blessing nonetheless.

And as those who are blessed we need to ask ourselves:

Do we talk about our Lord only when we are in church?

Do we only dive deep into our faith when we want something from God?

Are we like those who believe quietly, not wanting to stick our neck out and share what we believe?

Because if we remain shy, and reserved, and not wanting to say anything for fear of being judged...how will those who need a good word from the Lord, ever hear it? How will those who need something / someone from outside them to declare to them that they are not alone...where will they hear it?

Hear again the words of Jesus from last week:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.

I didn't live here in Mass. during the blizzard of '78, but I've read that not only was the city immobilized by the immense volume of snow, but that much of Boston lost power. Evidently the

Boston Edison Power Company had sufficient power in its generating system to meet all the needs of the city, but there was a problem in one simple transformer in the main plant and with the transmission lines from a substation. The power was there, it just couldn't get out.

So it is with the Christian life. The power of God is there – is here: You ARE the salt of the earth; you ARE the light of the world.

Just as the city of Boston does not live in the generating plant itself, we don't live in the immediate presence of God and Christ in a physical sense. He sends his Holy Spirit into his disciples – that's us. His power goes out into the world where we live.

That requires "transformers" and "transmission lines." It requires disciples who will cause their light to shine where people live and die.

We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world.
 We are the thermostats in a world of varying temperatures.
 We are the one infectious disease that God wants all people to catch.
 We are the transmission lines, the transformers, that God has chosen.
 We are the singers of the songs of the Lord.

And what in all this does God ask of us? The God who puts his light into us, the God who seasons us with his presence, the God who imparts his song into our hearts? He asks that we follow him and witness to him as faithfully as we can. But following him will cost us.

That's what's happening when we go on the Youth Mission trip. Mostly what it costs us is in our hearts, when they break as we are face to face with the pain and suffering of others. And so we share the love of God as we go.

You see, God makes us the salt of the earth; but salt, however, does not exist for its own sake. No one sits down to eat salt and salt alone. Salt is a seasoning meant to be applied to something, it is meant to preserve and flavor the food that we eat.

And in the same way light is not meant to be looked at, it is not meant to be covered and treasured like some precious object. It is given so that people might see what is around them and walk in safety. It is meant to overcome darkness.

It's called "costly grace" – the life of obedience to the call and teaching of Jesus. You are blessed, you are salt, you are light, Jesus says.

At first it changes us – we begin to believe that we're blessed; and our habits change as we trust in God rather than ourselves. And then it begins to change the world around us. And from there...who knows?

For now though, remember that you are a thermostat, not a thermometer. You are blessed. You are salt and you are light - spice and shine! So go spice up and light up the world that others may give glory to your Father in heaven. Amen.