
Rise Up and Follow Thee

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Epiphany 5 – Year A

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.”

We all know what it is like. We have hiked to the top of a mountain, stood on the edge of a cliff, or climbed to the top of the Cathedral bell tower (if you are in one of the Dean’s Bible Studies). Standing there looking out over the landscape becomes an awesome and holy moment, and your conversation takes on a spiritual dimension.

That is what is happening in today’s gospel. Jesus is on the mountain telling the disciples what it means to follow him. Jesus says, “You are to be the salt of the earth,” “You are to be the light of the world,” and “Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.”

Today, I want to talk about two things: 1. The importance of salt and light, and 2. What it means for our righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

First, the importance of salt and light.

When you take your first job after college you don’t have much money or vacation time. So, my college friend, Austin Hall, and I decided it was the ideal time to visit our National Parks.

We both loved the outdoors. We both happened to be Boy Scouts, and we enjoyed scouting so much we became Eagle Scouts. And on this Scout Sunday, I need to mention Austin was a member of our very own Troop 74.

Well, our first big trip was an excursion that took us to Bryce, Zion, and the Grand Canyon. And we decided to end the trip with the hike of all hikes at the Grand Canyon. We were going to attempt to hike from the top to the bottom and back out in one day.

Now, if you Google hiking from the top to the bottom and back out in one day, it will take you to the National Park webpage, where it says “Do not attempt this hike.” Unfortunately, most Boy Scouts don’t understand those words: “Do not attempt this hike.”

Thankfully, the Boy Scout motto is “Be Prepared,” so we elicited the advice of one of Sewanee’s favorite professors, the great outdoorsman and geology professor Bran Potter. He is a rock star, in more ways than one, and has hiked from the top to the bottom and back out many times before.

Since I was working at Sewanee, I scheduled a meeting with Dr. Potter and asked what we needed to do to complete the hike. Dr. Potter said, “If you attempt this hike you have to pack two things.” Any guesses? He said you have to take “salt and light.”

Light. Light because your hike will need to begin at 5 or 6 a.m., in the dark. Dr. Potter said the heat is severe at the bottom. You want to be down there early as the temperatures are rising, so you are only walking out in the heat. Light is important because it might take you all day to hike out of the canyon, and your last miles might occur in the dark. You have to have

light.

Salt. Salt because it will be over 100 degrees at the bottom of the canyon. Since your sweat evaporates in the dry heat you will be unaware of the loss of salt. If your body loses that much salt it will be dangerous. Your backpack needs to look like you are stocking a potato chip aisle at the grocery store.

Salt and light are what got us through that hike.

Jesus tells the disciples to be salt and light. We are to be the light in a world that is struggling to see. We are called to be salt in a world that is stressed and out of balance. There are so many places for us to be salt and light: our families, schools, work, and government.

Jesus says, "You are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

The final point Jesus makes is that your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

When we hear about the scribes and Pharisees we tend to think hypocrisy, but today, Jesus points that these are religious people who follow the law, and our righteousness must exceed theirs.

What exactly does that mean?

At our staff meeting bible studies, Dean Candler says, when you see the word righteousness, think right relationship. Thus, our relationships need to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. We need to create holier relationships. And how do we do that?

Since it is Scout Sunday, let me offer another Scout Story:

During my first years of scouting we had a structured routine. We would hike, set up our tents, build a campfire, feast on an appetizer of crackers and Easy Cheese. When the fire was hot, we would unpack our personal mess kits and cook our individual cans of Hormel Chili or Dity Moore Beef Stew. About an hour later, we would fall asleep.

A few years in, someone said it felt like we had become an old married scouting troop just going through the motions. So, we had this idea we would collectively cook dessert.

And here is how a good idea spiraled into stupidity.

We decided to hike with a 20 pound Dutch oven. Yes, we all took turns carrying that stupid Dutch oven up and down the mountains of Tennessee.

After we started the fire, we would assemble the ingredients for a peach cobbler, place the Dutch oven next to the fire, and a few hours later in the evening...dessert.

Somehow sharing the weight of that Dutch oven, coming together to make peach cobbler, and feasting around the camp fire deepened our relationships with one another. It was a Eucharistic moment.

That is what Jesus is talking about. The scribes and the Pharisees go through their particular routines, their daily agendas, their busy schedules, all the things you and I do so well, but something is missing...the relationships aren't real...they need something more, they need a Dutch oven and peach cobbler.

And that is why this table is so important to us.

If we are to be salt and light in the world, we must be nourished at this table, so we can be sent out into the world to do the work we have been given to do, to love and serve as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord (as salt and light).

And if our righteousness is to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, this table reminds us that life is more than going through the motions, it is about being in Holy Communion with those around us, from those who are very dear to us, to those who are very different from us.

The best way to be salt and light...the best way to have your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees involves

taking everything you know from there (altar), and bringing it here (hearts), then sharing it out there (into our lives).

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