

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, February 9, 2020
Matthew 5:13-20

On October 30th of 2013, the winter sun shone in the Norwegian town of Rjukan for the first time. Nestled in a deep and narrow valley between two steeply rising mountains, this town lies in shadow every year from September until March. The winter sun, while it does in fact shine, comes at such a low angle that it can't make its way between the mountains to the town. Living in this town, the residents are able to see sunlit blue sky but cannot experience the warmth and light of the sun. The 3,400 people who live there must leave the town and ascend the peaks to get some sunlight. For half of the year, the people live in shadow.

The founder, Sam Eyde, developed the town of Rjukan over a century ago to provide housing for the workers at the hydroelectric power plant he built at the foot of a large waterfall. Apparently, he knew then that something needed to be done to bring sunshine to the town and he proposed using mirrors to reflect the light, but the technology of the time prevented the realization of his vision. Instead, he installed a cable car to bring the residents to the top of one of the mountains so they may get a fix of needed sunlight.

By the turn of the 21st century, however, this vision of using mirrors became a viable option, and the mirror project was revived in 2005, and came online in the fall of 2013. Three large mirrors controlled by computers were installed on the adjacent mountain. These mirrors follow the course of the sun and brought winter sunshine to the town for the very first time.

That day, more than a thousand people gathered and cheered on as part of the town square became bathed in reflected sunlight. In contrast with the one other functional sun mirror at the time in Italy which reflects a fainter and more diffused sunlight over a large area, the installation of these sun mirrors in Rjukan was designed to create a smaller and more concentrated patch of sunlight which maintains 80-90% of the intensity of the sunlight experienced up on top of the mountain. They created a special sunlit spot in the middle of town that residents could step into for a few minutes of sun.

Many residents were deeply skeptical of the project (and some remain so), concerned about the high cost, how the mirrors will be maintained, and will it be too hot in the summer, among other issues. However, nearly all came out to see and enjoy the sunlight that day. As one resident said, "I miss the sun here in winter terribly. It can be so hard. This is the light I long for."

Our gospel reading today expands on the call to discipleship that we learn about in the Beatitudes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Just prior to this reading in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus has been traveling throughout Galilee, teaching, preaching, and healing. Word about Jesus has spread far and wide, and crowds now follow him. Jesus ascends the mountainside, sits down, and begins his teaching, to the disciples specifically and to Israel corporately. He teaches about discipleship: blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the pure of heart....

In our reading today, Jesus uses two metaphors to describe who his followers are and what they are in the world. The first metaphor, "you are the salt of the earth", suggests that Jesus' disciples have been given a distinctive capacity to elicit goodness on the earth. Salt flavors; it makes food come alive in what would otherwise seem tasteless or bland. Salt can be used as a preservative, keeping food fresh for an extended period of time. In Judaism, salt was also a symbol of loyalty and covenant fidelity. As the salt of the earth, disciples have an explicit charge to witness to the new covenant brought about in God's work in Jesus. And to live that out, to embody this new work of the Spirit that is bringing close the kingdom of heaven.

But there is the ever-present danger of disciples losing fidelity to the mission. Salt loses its saltiness not by some chemical miracle, but by becoming so impure, so mixed with other elements,

that it loses its function. That is the risk of taking God's mission out into the world. But salt in and of itself and left alone has no value either. The saltiness only has value when it is at work in the world; preserving, flavoring, purifying... Salt does not exist for itself, and nor do the disciples; their lives are to be turned outward into the world.

The second metaphor Jesus uses, "you are the light of the world", invites us to consider the role of the disciples as a gathered community. Light enables us to see and is a kind of energy that is life-giving and provides color. Like light, the disciples, as a community, have the overarching purpose of being the mirror that reflects and shines God's light, so that all peoples and nations can know of God's justice and mercy. Each of us individually – and all of us collectively – are called to be the light that brings light to the whole house of creation. And all of creation yearns for the light of God's love. As the resident of the Norwegian town said as she sat in the reflected circle of light, "This is the light I long for."

Light not only illuminates but also draws us closer. Light invites us to come out from the isolated shadows to gather with each other – to become the people of light. Life of discipleship in the gospel of Matthew is presented as life within the community of faith – a community charged with a mission to the world. The disciples are called to active mission of "letting their light shine" to "all", but they do not generate the light, any more than salt generates its own saltiness or the people of Rjukan, Norway, generate sunlight. Jesus Christ calls us all individually and collectively as the gathered community, and as such we are recipients of the light from which God is the source. And our grateful response to this gift is to reflect and shine Christ's light into the darkness – in turn, calling others to come, gather with us, and bathe in the light.

The salt and light metaphors picture mission as inherent to discipleship, as saltiness is inherent to salt and shining is to light. The disciples have not been set alight for their own sakes, but for the sake of the world. And as Jesus points not to his own glory but to the glory of God, so the purpose of the disciples' engaging in their acts of righteousness and justice is not for their own sake, but to make known God's redemptive work in the world.

Jesus' call to each and every one of us is a call to discipleship – *come, follow me*. As a community of faith, a city upon a hill, we are the disciples charged with shining the light of the Good News of God in Christ. And especially, we are charged with bringing this light to the darkness, illuminating the shadows and cobwebs in the neglected corners of our house and of all of God's creation.

So, how will we bear witness to God's redemptive work in the world? How will we as the community of faith, as The Church of the Good Shepherd... how will we embody the law, retain and share our saltiness, and reflect God's light of justice, mercy, forgiveness, and righteousness to a world that is so deeply longing for it?

Two Sundays ago, at our Annual Parish Meeting, I proposed a metaphor that illustrates the important work we, as a parish family, have done over the past few years. I used the structure of "Ready, Set, Go!" to show how the work we have invested in restoring, restructuring, and re-enlivening our parish infrastructure and ministries have placed us in position to launch into our future.

What lays immediately ahead, the "Go!" stage, is as yet the least defined and requires our careful and prayerful discernment. Over this coming year, we will engage in an extended conversation to envision and discern the mission and ministry of Good Shepherd and how God calls each of us, individually and as a parish family, to serve God and our neighbor. We will pray and listen to the Holy Spirit's guidance for how we may be like salt and light: how we may continue to build that city upon a hill; how we may let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.

Amen.