



Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A teenage boy finally passed his driver's test and went to his Dad to ask about working out a schedule for his use of the family car. The Dad said, "son, I want you to raise your GPA from a 2.0 to a 3.0, read your Bible every day, and get a haircut. If you do all of that then we'll talk about letting you use the car on a regular basis." Some weeks went by and the Father noticed that the son's grades were steadily rising and the boy was reading the Bible every day but he still hadn't gotten a haircut. Six weeks later the Son asked the Dad about the car again and the Dad said "well, son, if you done everything I asked but you haven't cut your hair, why not?"

The boy said, "well, in reading the Bible I noticed that Moses had long hair, Samson had long hair, John the Baptist had long hair, and some people even think that Jesus might have had long hair." And the dad replied, "yeah, and did you notice that those guys walked everywhere they went?"

Our joke this morning points us to something that I think is actually a bit tricky when it comes to reading the Gospels, and especially when reading Jesus' teaching passages such as the Sermon on the Mount, which we hear today. That trickiness is around the idea of imitating Jesus.

At a basic level it makes sense to look at Jesus' life and to seek to imitate him, but the more deeply we study his life the more tricky that idea becomes. We can certainly be kind and treat others with love, but what about forgiving our enemies? What about selling everything we own and giving it to the poor? What about confronting religious and political authorities regarding their corruption and immorality? What about driving the money changers out of the Temple, for example?

A mere direct imitation of Jesus' life can quickly become problematic for many different reasons and here's why: Jesus had his calling and we each have our callings. The Son of God became flesh and blood as the man Jesus Christ to fulfill a very specific mission: to reveal our place in God's life as his adopted children

and to heal us of our blindness to God's love. You and I, we each have our own missions in life to fulfill, we each have our own unique callings from God to respond to. So, while we are called to live like Jesus we are called to live like him within our own unique situations in life.

This is where I think the text from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians can be helpful. In our Gospel text Jesus tells us we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world – and that we should live out that truth about ourselves. But he doesn't tell us exactly how to do that. If we turn to Paul's letter, however, we begin to get an idea of what it takes to actually live like Jesus rather than simply imitate Jesus. Paul tells us that in order to comprehend what God is doing we have to be in communion with the Spirit that is from God. If we are in communion with the Holy Spirit then we are able to “understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.” That is to say, we are each able to understand the unique way that we are each gifted by God, and called by God, to be salt and light in this world.

Consider, for example, what we heard from Isaiah. The prophet tells us that God expects us to work against injustice, help oppressed people find freedom, share our food with the hungry, find shelter for the homeless, and help clothe those who are in poverty. There are many ways we might fulfill this calling: we can vote for leaders who are working against injustice and poverty, we can contribute our time and money to agencies that work on these problems, and we can befriend and build relationships with people who need these kinds of help. In all those ways and more we would be living out our identity as salt and light, just as Jesus calls us to do.

In fact, there are so many ways we can help others that it may sometimes seem overwhelming to try to choose among them. But remember what Paul said: the Holy Spirit will enable us to understand the gifts bestowed on us by God – the Holy Spirit will guide us to the places, the work, the tasks to which we are called and where we can make a difference.

Therefore, I would say, that living like Jesus (not just imitating him,) and being the salt and light of the world, and living out God's calling as expressed by Isaiah, is primarily about being able to hear and follow the lead of the Holy Spirit as Paul explained it to the Corinthians. How do we do that? How do we live in communion with the Spirit so that we know what God is calling us to do?

The first big step is to enter into silence and contemplation. These are two aspects of the spiritual life that I've discussed these past two Sundays and they are still relevant to what we're hearing in the scriptures. Even-

tually we have to step away from the rush and roar of our daily lives and enter into silence, no longer talking all the time but rather listening – listening for the Holy Spirit to convey the calling of Christ to us. Within that silence we must be contemplative; we must contemplate who God is, what the scriptures say to us, and who we have been created to be in Christ. From within this silent land of our souls, where we are living a contemplative life of communion with the Spirit, we will begin to discern the deepest calling of God in our lives.

Lent is fast approaching – just a little over two weeks away. Between now and then I would encourage you to take some time to think about how you want to spend your time in Lent. You can certainly give up chocolate, or sugar, or meat if you'd like to, but perhaps there's something deeper we can do with Lent. Perhaps there's a way we can experience more silence, a new level of contemplation, and a deeper sense of God's calling in our lives. Perhaps, if we step more deeply into the contemplative life, we can emerge into Easter as saltier salt and brighter lights for Christ than ever before.

Amen.