

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 5:13-20

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112:1-9

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

February 5, 2023

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

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When it comes to reading, I love reading books that are part supernatural mystery and part commentary on who we are as human beings. And if it includes a little bit of theology along the way, even better! And...my brother recently loaned me a book that is right up my alley...It's called *Odd Thomas* by Dean Koontz. The main character is a young man named Odd. (His name is actually Todd but the "t" was left off of his birth certificate by mistake.)

Odd has the ability to see beyond our basic human understanding of the world. A kind of 6<sup>th</sup> sense. Not only can he see spirits (those who have died but haven't quite left this world) but he also has a profound understanding of what causes these spirits to linger...the things they struggled with in life, the hurts that won't heal, the burdens they can't bear, the wrongs they can't right. Odd, for his part, takes a particular interest in the question of why humans cause this kind of deep discontent within themselves, the kind that holds on to their souls (living or dead).

He observes that the process to right the wrongs within ourselves, to become a person who is good and right and just is something we have to strive for. But the *"the training [to get there] is unnecessarily hard."*

The training is unnecessarily hard. That phrase has stuck with me. Does it resonate with you? When I think of that phrase, it makes me think about bitterness that we carry, anger, resentment, despair. Old grudges. Guilt or shame. The things we hold on to. The things that weigh us down. The things that cause us to be less than the person God created us to be. Do you have those kinds of things in your life? Can you name them?

Now once you have named them or at least allowed yourself to feel them, the question must become...can you offer them over to God? How God might want us to address those places that just seem unnecessarily hard?

Our texts this morning go right to the heart of this issue. And in fact, Jesus' message in Matthew is that your life doesn't have to be unnecessarily hard. We have agency to do something about it. The second thing is that Jesus expects us to not only name our discontent but to work together to mend the fractures that are at the root of our discontent.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus calls us to be two things. Two things that can make a radical difference in our lives and in this world. He calls us to be salt and light. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are essential building blocks of God's good creation.

And, when Jesus says “you” are the salt and the light he isn’t talking about any one person alone. He isn’t pointing a finger at you as an individual. He’s calling us beyond ourselves and talking about ALL of us, together. “You” is used here in the plural. Therefore, Jesus is saying that **all** of you are the salt of the earth. **All** of you are the light of the world. Community matters. We aren’t alone.

Here’s another interesting point...notice the verb that is used in both of these phrases. They say that we **ARE** the salt of the earth. We **ARE** the light of the world. “Are” is used in the present. Not the past and not the future. That means we already possess what is good and right and just within us. We didn’t lose it. We aren’t waiting for it. It is already there. It is already there IF we choose to recognize it. The goodness in our lives can prevail over what is unnecessarily hard. But, man, can we make things tough on ourselves. We can carry our hurt and anger with us until it eats away at our very core.

Julian of Norwich (who we are going to be studying during Lent) reflected on this dilemma in her Revelations. She writes...

*“I saw no anger except on man’s part, and God forgives that in us; for anger in nothing else but a resistance and contrariness to peace and to love, and it comes either from lack of strength, or from lack of wisdom, or from lack goodness – and this lack is not from God, but it is on our part, for through sin...we have in us...a continual resistance to peace and to love...”*

She goes on to ponder that once we acknowledge that we have a choice, once we put our struggles in God’s hands...the grief, the loss, the anger...God will use those experiences and grow our light and use it for greater good. The result...we not only let go of our own pain but we begin to more open to other people, more sensitive, and more understanding.

Julian acknowledges that such openness takes courage...courage to address our wounds. Courage to have faith enough to offer our wounds to God. And, courage to wait for God to transform our hearts so that the good within us can grow.

This process isn’t a dismissal of our hurt. It’s wholeheartedly saying enough of the pain, enough of the anger, enough of the hurt. We offer it all to God so that we can deal with it and let it go. Not ignore it or excuse it. Not continue in harmful cycles. But to work through it with faithful hearts and willing spirits.

I want to leave you with a wonderful reflection by Methodist pastor and theologian John van de Laar. He writes...

*“It is when we are salt and light – those who live out in our own lives what we seek to see in the world – that we make a real difference. Salt and light people are those who bring flavour and colour, integrity and insight, healing and compassion into the world by the way they live, love and interact. Their influence is felt not through judgement or legalism, but through a life lived*

*with a completely different quality, that touches others with grace and truth and compassion and calls out to the best in them, leaving them longing to live better lives themselves.”*

I love that the sign at Calvary Chapel right down the street sums up these teachings perfectly. The sign this week reads...When you are willing, God is able. Folks...it starts within our own hearts when we are willing. And when we are willing, God will indeed be able to transform our pain, to mend what is broken, to heal what hurts...so that we may live a life of grace and truth and compassion...for ourselves and for the world. Amen.