

There's a Sufi tale of a blind man, who in addition to being unable to see, also had a bald head. To punish him for a misdemeanor he had committed, the king put the poor fellow in a specially built prison designed like a maze or labyrinth. The prison had a number of false doors but only one real door, which opened and led to the light of the outside world. By the king's order, anyone who could find the real door could step through it and immediately gain his freedom. For a long time the blind man felt his way carefully around the prison's wall, searching for the one real door. But as it happened, every time he actually came to it, he was distracted by an itch on his bald head. As a result, he scratched his head each time he came to the door to freedom and then kept moving slowly along the prison walls, missing the one real door over and over again.

I imagine our reflection on this little story will give us significant insights about our lives today—certainly it does for me. In the course of one morning at my desk, the interruptions and distractions come at me frequently, diverting me from something I really need and want to finish but don't return to for hours. That's life for so many of us, at work and at home. A day of fun and relaxation planned with our family may have to be postponed or cancelled because of some other pressing obligation. A relaxing conversation goes unfinished because the sounds of text messages ring out again and again. Ignoring the phone is impossible because callers either keep calling until we answer or leave a message that nags us until we take care of it. I'm showing my age when I say that life was easier before the technology that was designed to make it easier. Distractions, distractions, distractions! When we are constantly distracted and our lives are ruled by the tyranny of the apparently urgent, it's hard to slow down and stay focused or even *re-focus*.

Re-focusing is just what Jesus is doing in today's passage from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard the Beatitudes that eloquently praise and promise reward for those who follow Jesus in their acts and in their attitudes. Now we're moving into more focused teachings that emphasize his purpose—to reinforce and fulfill the law and the prophets, to bring deeper meaning to what had been spoken to God's people in the past. In recent weeks we've heard for ourselves the connections Jesus speaks of, words from the prophets reinforced by the words of Jesus. Some of these lessons from the prophets are so direct that they sting us, like Micah's call last week to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, and today's accusations from Isaiah to Israel. There's no mistaking what they mean and no place to hide for those who wish to ignore the examples set for generations to come. We can't say we haven't been given notice.

Jesus' transition from the Beatitudes to the ethical requirements for following him is a bit softer. Using two common examples that anyone can relate to, then or now, he eases us into more serious conversation. These verses about salt and light are self-explanatory, really. We all use salt, in a variety of ways, and anyone who has had their salt intake restricted will agree about the improvements it makes to ordinary food. That's also the case with light, whether the improvement comes from our modern light bulbs or from the candles and torches that lit the night in the ancient world and for thousands of years after. Jesus is telling the disciples that just as salt changes or improves the taste of food, their lives should profoundly affect the world around them. And just as light exposes whatever is hidden by darkness, their purpose is to illuminate God's love and mercy as known to them through Jesus Christ. Yet even though the disciples are called to be salt and light, that is in no way meant to direct others to *them*. They and we are only meant to direct others to Christ in the same way that these verses bring us to the substance of what Jesus is teaching.

Despite their transitory nature and the simplicity of the examples they convey, these verses give us an important tool for understanding how Jesus wants us to serve him. That's why it's essential that we hear both what they do *and* what happens when they don't. "...if salt has lost its taste," he asks, "how can its saltiness be restored?" "No one lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,

but on the lampstand and it gives light to all in the house.” Thinking of the light from a candle, as Jesus probably was, we know that if it’s put under a basket it will probably grow dim, then go out. He tells us specifically that when salt is no longer good for anything, it’s thrown out and trampled under foot. Two not-so-subtle warnings, yet no advice about how to make the salt salty again or whether the extinguished candle can again shed light. Perhaps his intent is to give us notice that we’d better keep the salt salty and the light lit.

In my sermon on this passage three years ago, I quoted William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940s, who said that “the church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members.” I noted that in the years since he said that the church has turned inward, focusing on the needs of the institution and its members. The decline in membership and in the church’s impact on the world is evident everywhere, in every denomination, in churches of all sizes and all locations, and unfortunately here at St. Francis. A year or so ago a couple who had not attended church here in months came one Sunday morning. As they were leaving, the man told me that St. Francis had gotten too “crusty.” They haven’t been back since. But I think of that conversation often, and I’ve come to believe he meant that the crust here is thicker than the tasty, salty ingredients it covers, that you have to dig too deep to discover why we’re here. Through the years, there has been more energy and enthusiasm in criticism and negativity than in collaboration and cooperation, and significant effort often is made to keep things the way they’ve always been, even though God told us from the beginning that Jesus was coming to make changes.

Three years ago, I named “inertia” as one of the causes of the church’s loss of energy and focus. As you know, “inertia” means “lack of movement or activity,” but it’s also a feeling of not having the energy or desire to move or change. Now, as then, I believe it can mean not knowing *how* to move or change and being afraid to risk comfort for possible failure. Often, it seems that because we’re so focused on the safeness and safety we find within the institution of the church and its rituals and practices, we’ve grown unwilling, even unable, to move beyond our walls into the path of discipleship to which Jesus calls us as his followers. We forget how often Jesus discounted the rituals and requirements held so dearly by the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes.

As you know, last weekend members of the vestry, those you elected to be your leaders, gathered in retreat to make plans for the remainder of 2017 and to begin looking beyond this year into the years to come. There were honest conversations about many things both now and in our history, events and situations that have become part of the DNA of this parish and play a significant role in who we are now. Over the life of St. Francis, there have been many opportunities for human beings to mess up, laity and clergy alike. That’s what we do because we are not divine, we are human and imperfect. All too often, these mess-ups have resulted in grief that was never acknowledged, divisions that were never resolved, wounds too deep to be healed with a spray of Neosporin and a Bandaid. These situations and circumstances are rarely discussed and never in retrospection. They are likely the sources for this inertia, as well as the overriding distrust of change, and fear of being uncomfortable that we do acknowledge, both of which contradict our Lord’s call to love and serve him with gladness and singleness of heart.

Sounds kind of dismal, doesn’t it, for an institution founded on hope in a world that *needs* hope more and more every day. But there’s good news. There always is, you know. First, there are the promises made to us by God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Promises about everlasting life, but equally important, about life in the here and now, in the Kingdom of Heaven where we live because we follow Christ. More tangibly, there is the leadership of this parish, members of the vestry who are not only ready to bring us out of the land of inertia, but have already begun the work and who will be inviting you to be part of it. They have committed to pray each and every day for you, and me, and each other, and not only to be your leaders but to be your encouragers. Put away the distractions and say “yes” when they ask, and together we’ll discover the exciting future God has planned for this beautiful rock church up on the hill.

YOU are the salt of the earth. YOU are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so

that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. *Amen.*