Jesus' simple images teach us much

Salt and Light. How basic can you get? Jesus showed his genius by taking the simplest elements and exploring their meaning. Salt, light, bread, wine, oil, flesh, blood, earth, and even spittle formed the stuff of his ministry. By taking common, ordinary images, Jesus connected with his listeners and showed us what bonds the human community.

Today we think of salt in terms of something tasty, but dangerous. It brings out the flavors of food. It turns up on virtually every table for every meal. It raises one's blood pressure, but helps retain water for those who exercise heavily. It melts slugs. It breaks up snow and ice, but clings nastily to our cars. No pretzel, margarita, or home-made ice cream is complete without it.

However, one modern convenience has kept us from appreciating the full range of Jesus’ metaphor. The refrigerator. Once upon a time the only way to preserve food was to salt it. Now we chill it. Most folks prefer the new method, but it has removed “preservative” from the vocabulary of descriptions for salt. I admit, it’s silly to imagine Jesus saying, “You are the refrigerator of the earth.” But you’d get a better idea of what kind of disciple he wanted to form. Disciples add flavor to the world while they preserve it from decay.

Without that tang, without that power, disciples are good for nothing but to be thrown out, like the first pancake. Like any good general, coach, teacher, or ringmaster, Jesus will entrust his followers with power, but he expects them to deliver.

The second image from next Sunday’s Gospel (Mt 5:13-16) is light. In John’s Gospel, Jesus twice calls himself the light of the world (8:12 and 9:5). The candle we light each Easter vigil, each Easter season, each baptism, and each funeral proclaims the same mystery: Christ is our light. Thanks be to God. It’s a little surprising then to hear Matthew’s Jesus turn the metaphor around. “You are the light of the world,” he tells his new disciples. Imagine living in a one-room house where one lamp will illumine the darkest corners at night. Set a bushel basket on top and you’ll have a nicely lit interior of a bushel basket. But lights are for rooms, not for measuring containers.

A Malady which threatens every worshipper is what we might call “private light disease.” We so enjoy our company with God that we want to keep it to ourselves. We hug it close, and smother the brightness of its fire. Some people try to cure “private light disease” with the wrong medicine. They go public with their faith not to draw attention to God, but to draw attention to themselves.

Jesus does not mince words. The light you possess was meant to be shared. The reason for sharing is that God will receive the glory.

So, as simple as these images are, they mask an unsettling challenge from Jesus. After eloquently opening his sermon on the mount with the beatitudes, Jesus tosses a firecracker into the room: You, yes you. You are salt. You have work to do. You are light. You should get busy. Either you’re a worthless lump or a witness to God’s glory. There’s no middle ground for salt and light.

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