

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany 2011
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At the Wednesday Eucharist, after the Breaking of the Bread, we have been using an acclamation from the Society of Saint John the Evangelist.¹ It goes this way--

Priest: *Behold what you are.*

People: *May we become what we receive.*

Behold, what you are – you are the Body of Christ.

“May we become what we receive” – we receive the Body of Christ that we might become the Body of Christ

Trinity Church is the Body of Christ. And on this day we receive what we are and what we are becoming – the Body of Christ. This weekly Eucharist is the reconstituting of what we are.

Salt and Light

In today's Gospel Jesus is instructing his emerging church about “what it is.” He is saying “Behold what you are.” His answer on that day is -- “You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world.”

We are salt and light and we are being recreated as salt and light. We are the Body of Christ and we are being made new as the Body of Christ.

Week-by-week, day-by-day we express what we already are/ and we are remade anew. The expressing and remaking are both done in the same spiritual practices of Eucharist and the Prayers, Reflection and Community, and Service in the routines of daily life.

We are a community with a weekly practice of breaking the bread and a daily practice of continuing in the Prayers.

And we grow by giving ourselves to the fullness of Eucharistic life – by laying our lives upon the altar so God may take and bless us; so we may be bread for the world.²

We grow as we better engage the ancient cycle of daily prayer, by which God is praised and creation redeemed.

We are a community with an inner stillness and silence. *And we grow* as we increase our comfort with stillness and silence. For it is out of a deep

inner silence we can effectively “minister to, the perplexity and confusion of the modern world”³

We are a community in which we recreate each other⁴ in the simple process of being with one another. Being at Trinity for 300 celebrations of the Eucharist and 200 coffee hours will change you. And we can become better at being a community -- allowing us to be more effective instruments of grace to one another.⁵

We are a community of adoration and awe that serves the world in its daily life and work. And we can increase our openness to adoration and awe so our service will be even more an offering and blessing not an act of ego and self-assertion.⁶

What the Christ says to his church is --
You are salt; don't lose your flavor.
You are light, don't cover that up

This past week Michelle Heyne, Nat Brown and I joined in the Wednesday Eucharist and had dinner together. Nat is serving this parish he loves. He is talking with people one by one and in small groups. He is asking them – what must we do for Trinity to increase its membership.

I have thought about Nat's questions that night. Here's what I came up with:

First -- That we would set aside any anxiety about growing. No one really knows how to do it anyway. Parishes that get caught up in that concern seem to end up driven and compulsive.

Second -- That we would focus our energies on what we can do – be the healthiest Trinity Church possible.

Focus on health not growth. Seek first the Kingdom – all the rest will fall in place.

Third – that we would give ourselves even more fully to what we already are – this Anglican/Episcopal way of being a Christian.

Forth – We would be more open to what God sends us week by week.

For ourselves and for those that come to us --

To be so alive that when people encounter this parish they would feel hope, they would sense the possibility of a new and different world. ⁷

They would experience that because we experience that.

People visiting each Sunday would experience worship of such grace and beauty that they would find themselves enchanted and drawn into this Anglican way of being a Christian.

That in the routine exchanges of coffee hour in addition to all the usually catching up and a bit of gossip, they would also sense in us humility, gentleness and patience.⁸

In their longing for “real life” we would be the salt that allowed them to take pleasure in life.

In their searching we would be the light that gave them hope.

This weekend – I was consulting with a parish outside of DC. They are a larger than us. They don't have all the resources for music that we have. They have more full time clergy and a much smaller endowment.

I was working with their vestry. I'm going to do with you the same thing I did with them.

Raise your hand.

If I ask you about whether the idea of evangelizing, spreading the good news, bring people to Jesus excites you – hold up you fingers to show 5 – exciting, energy – 1 turn off, doesn't feel right. (What they did in DC --1, 2, 3 a couple of 4s.) [Note what we did at Trinity – 2 or 3 4s and 5s, around 9 1s, 2s and 3s]

If I ask you – is there something about this Anglican/Episcopal way of being a Christian that is of value in this world; that you would like others to share. Is there something about this acceptance of paradox and comprehensiveness, of beauty and an embracing of the world, of liturgy and holiness – that you believe the world needs and we are to share? – (What they did in the DC vestry -all 5s.) What the Trinity congregations did – a couple of 3s just about all others 5s]

That's pretty much what I hear in every Episcopal parish I've worked with.

The way faithful growth occurs in the church is that a parish gets healthier and healthier, it becomes more of what it is—one, holy, catholic, apostolic -- salt and light.

And sometimes when we do that a kind of buzz begins that is carried by members and visitors to others.

It is done by word of mouth, or possibly in a tweet, because there was something that strongly touched a person. Something that for a moment gave them a glimpse of the earth and world as enchanted.

All this is word of mouth, spontaneous, and grounded in a passion about who you are as a local expression of the Body of Christ.

What we are seeking is a buzz that is naturally carried by members and visitors to others because there was something charmed and that captured them.

You are the salt of the earth .. You are the light of the world.

Behold what you are

Nat asked Michelle and me about very specific things that could be done. We each offered a few ideas. On reflection here are actions we could take that are very specific and would in time increase our salt and light.

-The total Sunday experience of Eucharist and social time – move all the announcements to coffee hour. It will help the flow and grace of Liturgy and allow the community to share information more informally over coffee. It will improve the Eucharist and help build the community life.

-That we begin to have times and ways in which the parish community expresses a collective voice. That we learn those skills of community life. So we may listen to one another about our hopes and our frustrations. And so we might have a better way of being mutually accountable to one another. So that when someone gets it wrong (and we will get it wrong) around liturgy, or music, or green practices, or spiritual practices – we engage them with kindness, patience and forgiveness rather than assertion and impatience. And that we have routine ways of providing coaching and feedback.

-That we continue to improve coffee hour by doing two things – 1) offer real milk and real cream rather than powder and 2) we invite ourselves to put on nametags every week. That we do that both because we want to make it easier for the visitor (those God has sent us), because we want to be kind, and because we'd rather not do it. (an act of humility)

I have been on a bishop's staff in a diocese of 200 parishes; and I have consulted with hundreds of parishes.

In parish after parish I have seen a secret longing of the heart. Priests, wardens, and parishioners with a sense, sometimes uncertain, that their parish has enduring value. That there is more to them than they know themselves. Certainly more than they have words for.

The people walking the streets around this church, the health care workers of First Hill, the gay community of Capital Hill, the office workers of downtown – they also have a deep longing. They want to know and feel that their lives are real, that that have some significance beyond being workers and consumers. They would like to know that there is glory, splendor and beauty in the depths of life.

All this longing is what Jesus speaks to on the mount that day.

A life of “joy and wonder” is there for the taking. But for it to be found that vision must be enfolded in human lives and parish communities.

You are the salt of the earth .. You are the light of the world.

Behold what you are

¹ The Episcopal monastery in Cambridge.

² *For the fully Christian life is a Eucharistic life: that is, a natural life conformed to the pattern of Jesus, given in its wholeness to God, laid on his altar as a sacrifice of love, and consecrated, transformed by his inpouring life, to be used to give life and food to other souls.*

Evelyn Underhill

³ *Any authentic priesthood must derive from an inner core of silence, a life hid with Christ in God ...Only those who are at home with silence and darkness will be able to survive in, and minister to, the perplexity and confusion of the modern world. Let us seek that dark silence out of which an authentic ministry and a renewed theology can grow and flourish.*

Kenneth Leech, during the 1988 retreat of the Order of the Ascension.

⁴ *We are one, after all, you and I. Together we suffer, together exist, and forever will recreate each other.* Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

⁵ *God has so ordained things that we grow in faith only through the frail instrumentality of one another.* John of the Cross

⁶ *One's first duty is adoration, and one's second duty is awe and only one's third duty is service. And that for those three things and nothing else, addressed to God and no one else, you and I and countless human creatures evolved...We observe then that two of the three things for which our souls were made are matters of attitude, or relation: adoration and awe. Unless these two are right, the last of the triad, service, won't be right.* Evelyn Underhill, *Concerning the Inner Life*

⁷ In Biblical terms -- they would in their time among us, have a taste of the Holy City, an experience of the Kingdom of God.

⁸ “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,” (Ephesians 4:2)