

“Wisdom that Leads to Life”
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 6, 2011
1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

I was returning home late one night after being out somewhere with my parents and younger brother and sister. I was nine or ten at the time. It was a bright night time sky, with a few scattered clouds. As we started up the steps to the front porch I looked up and saw a sight that struck terror in my very soul. It appeared to me for all the world as if the moon was falling from the sky. I’m sure I should have known by that point that what I saw were clouds passing between myself and the moon, giving the appearance of the moon falling, but that wasn’t what it looked like to me. My family didn’t seem to notice anything unusual, so I kept my worries to myself and went inside to a fitful night’s sleep.

This was around the time when Cold War tensions were at their height. The Cuban Missile Crisis wasn’t long after that, and I remember my 7th grade geography teacher telling us that in the event of a nuclear war Pittsburgh was probably targeted by Russian missiles, and if war broke out we’d all probably go quickly.

All this was happening for me at that age when a child begins to realize what mortality is all about – when you discover that you, and everyone you love, are subject to forces beyond anyone’s control. It begins to set in that life isn’t a permanent arrangement. It’s scary, those early realizations. It is also the beginning of a kind of wisdom, when your life is suddenly placed within the larger scheme of things.

William Muehl, my old preaching professor, describes how this discovery was prompted for him. He remembers how as a child, on the kitchen table where he ate his lunch there often sat a box of soda crackers. On the box was a picture of a sailor boy holding a box of crackers on which there was a picture of a sailor boy holding a box of the

same crackers . . . and on and on. This presented a certain problem to his young mind, he said. But one eventually learns to dismiss that problem as many problems are dismissed, with a phrase: in this case, “infinite regression.” But before someone told him those magical words he did a lot of worrying about those sailor boys and cracker boxes. Where did they end? Did they ever end?

In a sense, he was peering into eternity, as I was, in a different way, when the moon seemed to be falling from the sky, as all of us are when we are caught out of time and made to ponder what it is that lay behind or beyond all that we see and know. Is it friend or is it foe? Or is it entirely disinterested? There is really no way of knowing the answer to that. I realized, I think, being raised in the church, that in my anxiety and worry I was learning something about the nature of God. It wasn't all sweetness and light, but also dark and frightful, and unknowable.

A boy was watching a public television program on endangered species. His mother was in the kitchen fixing supper and heard him talking to himself. “I am important. I do matter!” She leaned over the counter and said with a smile, “Of course you do. Did you ever doubt that?” The boy, not impressed by her tone of voice countered, “You don't understand! I do matter, because there's only one of me.” And, he might have added, “I am an endangered species.”

In his mother's quickness to reassure him, she underestimated the depth and importance of her son's uncertainty of his worth. She also failed to appreciate how he was coming to the awareness of his own intrinsic value as God made him – something that can't be learned from the outside, but only finally from within.

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.” This is wisdom, imparted to the mature, St. Paul wrote – what lay behind all appearances, all cause and effect, all rational and reasonable

explanations, true or hoped for. It can't be proven, but it can be shown, can only be shown, Jesus said, in being salt of the earth and light of the world.

Maybe because of those early fears of falling moons and missiles raining from the sky, I've always been inclined toward a kind of heaviness of spirit. But when I get stuck in that heaviness, which I sometimes do, I like to think of Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount: "You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world." Not, you "ought" to be, or you "should" be, but you are. I realize once again that faith isn't something you work your way into, but something that's given you – like a phone call or correspondence from an old friend, which says, in essence, "I've been here all along, thinking about you and caring about you." It lifts you up from the heaviness of all those "shoulds" and "oughts," and raises you to the level of "you are." And with it comes a lightness of spirit, the freedom in which God invites us to live in this world.

Throughout life we are confronted with those times and occasions when life is more uncertain than certain, when we are afraid that what we had always thought to be unlikely is suddenly likely, when the moorings of life have given way. There are times when we are overcome more by what we don't know than we are sustained by what we do know. There are times when we are afraid, and faith just isn't delivering. We're tempted to give up, or give in, or just drift away – as if to say to God, "I'll take it from here."

At any given time there are more than a few reasons to give up, or give in, or drift away. There is only one reason not to, as far as I can tell, but it's reason enough to give your life to – that in Jesus Christ God has inaugurated a new era, assuring those who love God that our fears, though real, ultimately rest in the arms of a loving creator. And that assurance is enough, enough for us to break through our fears and risk all for the sake of the kingdom. By his taking on the worst that life in the world has to give, we can live in freedom from fear so that we might realize the best that life is. And that is the freedom to

be as we are, not because of any inherent potential that we are called upon to recognize and develop, but by his own word – salt of the earth and light of the world.

So, what does that mean? Disciples of Jesus Christ enhance the lives of others, just as salt enhances the flavor of food, through their witness to the love in which they are held. They let their light shine, that the world might see all things as they truly are – as redeemed by his suffering love. “But if salt has lost its taste,” Jesus says, “it is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot.” Now actually, I understand, salt can’t lose its taste. Sodium chloride will always taste like salt. But it does lose its “saltiness” by becoming so mixed with other elements that it loses its function. We won’t enhance the lives of others if we allow the love of God within us to get all mixed up with anger and jealousy and greed and selfishness. We lose the initiative in living out our faith for others. Our light, the light that we are, is hidden as if under a bushel. Here Jesus may be referring to a common practice in his day whereby householders would leave their homes, and instead of blowing out their oil lamps and go through the difficulty of lighting them again when they returned, they’d set them outside and place a basket over them to protect them from blowing out. A good strategy for protection, but the price of such protection is darkness.

If there is a kind of wisdom that begins with the awareness of the awesome and overwhelming and even frightening mystery that surrounds us, there is greater wisdom, in Paul’s words – “the hidden and secret wisdom of God” – imparted to the more mature. Not that it is more difficult to understand in an intellectual sense than something even so simple as the clouds passing beneath the moon, or grasping the concept of “infinite regression.” No, as Eugene Peterson puts it in his rendering of this section of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: “We, of course, have plenty of wisdom to pass on to you once you get your feet on firm spiritual ground, but it’s not popular wisdom, the fashionable

wisdom of high-priced experts that will be out-of-date in a year or so. God's wisdom is something mysterious that goes deep into the interior of his purposes. It's not the latest message, but more like the oldest – what God determined as the way before we ever arrived on the scene . . .” (The Message)

Our eyes may not see into God's eternal realm. Our ears may not pick up the beating of angels' wings. Our hearts may not be able to hold more than a portion of the love offered to us by our God. But the better part of wisdom, the wisdom of the gospel, is that whether it be life or death, whether it be joy or suffering, whether it be certainty or doubt, the one who was crucified has blazed the trail for us through his total suffering and total love – so that life is won through death. The old rules no longer apply, which is why Jesus can declare in his beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are those who mourn . . . Blessed are the meek . . . Blessed are the merciful . . . Blessed are the peacemakers . . . Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake . . .

Let your shine shine, then. Bring it out! Season your relationships, your work, all your days with your own unique God-given flavor. For you are the salt of earth, the light of the world. Let us seek God's wisdom by receiving God's love. And in receiving it, dare to live as if it made a real difference in the world – for it does; it makes all the difference in the world.