

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 5:13-20

Estimating roughly, it's safe to say that anyone over the age of forty has vivid memories of life prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. (That estimate would include yours truly, as well.) Back in those days, it was common to speak of two "superpowers" in the world, where the Soviets were the standard-bearers for the Communist world and the Americans were the standard-bearers for the free world. And growing up in that era gave many of us immense resentment of Communism, largely because it represented the hardship and oppression that America has defeated or attempted to defeat. Certainly, throughout most of the Cold War years, America offered what could be seen as the opposite; instead of hardship and oppression, we enjoyed prosperity and opportunity. Because of this, we were able to hold our heads high, as our way of life, standard of living, and advances in science and technology were, in many ways, superior to those of our Soviet counterparts.

More recently, we've been referred to as the only remaining superpower in the world, but, because things aren't nearly so black-and-white these days, that which we're supposed to oppose seems all-too-plentiful and insidious. We don't have a country that's the "other" anymore, we have (for example) terrorism, which can be anywhere and much harder to identify. That said, how do we hold our heads high with the status and prestige we became accustomed to in decades past?

I, for one, am quick to warn against becoming too nostalgic for the good ol' days because, well, a lot of things weren't so good back then, particularly for

African Americans, women, and the LGBT community...not to mention the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. But, when placed side-by-side with this morning's Gospel text, the good ol' days were a time in which America could clearly identify its place in the world; we heard the words of Matthew and thought of ourselves, as the Evangelist wrote, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid" (5:14). Seen this way, our nation is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and witness.

Indeed, America has long been accustomed to seeing itself as the "city on a hill," as this nation has been the standard-bearer for the Western world. Freedom, democracy, and capitalism were the things that we wanted for ourselves and for the rest of the world to enjoy. And as long as the rest of the world saw that things were going well here, others would (presumably) want what we had!

Well, now we're in a world where these things can no longer be assumed, and other nations who apparently don't hold dear the same values are rising up faster than we'd have ever expected -- China being the preeminent example...not even the Coronavirus will hasten China's demise. Naturally, all kinds of fixes have been proposed to reassert America's superiority (economic superiority, in particular). You're likely familiar with the "STEM" acronym, which stands for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and all things STEM are often seen as the keys to America's competitiveness in the global economy. To some, STEM is just the fix we need...

One very dangerous benchmark that is being established here involves valuing jobs and careers exclusively in terms of their economic return. In other words, things that make money are good; things that don't...well, we can do without them! This means that a STEM-dominated future will virtually eliminate artists, philosophers, musicians, poets, and theologians -- just the people to whom we've

always looked for beauty, insight, and inspiration. Sure, you can be the greatest engineer in the world, but if you can't think, write, and communicate, what good will you be? And obviously, thinking, writing, and communication are no longer priorities in this new world we're entering into.

Speaking personally, I, at one time, had planned on becoming an engineer. After all, I enjoy machines and mechanical things and knowing how the all work, and I like designing and drafting things and imagining what they'll turn out like. So engineering or, perhaps, architecture, would be perfectly logical career choices for me.

Indeed, all is well...until we get to Advanced Math my senior year of high school.

It quickly became clear that I had neither the aptitude nor the ambition to master mathematical concepts that would be necessary for studying engineering in college. So I switched gears. I switched gears big time. I went from engineering to philosophy...from a science-based course of study to a humanities-based course of study. And that is one of the reasons why I'm standing here preaching to you today. You need to be able to think -- and you need to be able to communicate -- in order to be a minister of the Gospel.

But of what benefit am I to the economy? I am not employed by a major industry. I am not advancing America's pursuits in the areas of science and technology. I am not making this country more prosperous or competitive. And when the next recession hits, all I'll be able to do is pray. My career, in terms of its economic return, is completely worthless!

When Jesus tells us that we "are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13a), I don't hear him speaking in terms of our economic value in the global marketplace.

Rather, the image here is one of flavor...something you can't exactly put a dollar value on. As it turns out, we need things that taste good in this world, just as we need things that are interesting and beautiful. And, to use the language of the market economy, who produces these things? Well, it's the gourmet chefs, the writers, the thinkers, the music makers, and the clergy...people who labor not for the economic benefit of society, but for the moral, spiritual, and cultural benefit of society. Looking to Jesus, I can't help but ask myself, "Which is more important?" Is our witness to the world one that is restricted only to the money we have made or the amount of goods we have produced? Or is our witness to the world simply the good that we have done? I would hope you know the answers to those questions...

As Christians, our "usefulness" in the world cannot be measured in economic terms. Our goal is not to produce goods; rather, it is to produce good. If, as Jesus says, the salt "has lost its taste," we are no longer providing the "flavors" of insight, perspective, wisdom, and truth. Indeed, this is the sort of blandness that would bore even the most boring academic. And blandness is a sure sign of the complacency that will allow the Devil to spread his lies of greed and foolish economic gain.

Jesus isn't necessarily calling us to go out and do something that makes a lot of money. Economic recovery isn't his main area of interest. Spiritual recovery is. And if we reflect that as a people and a nation, it won't be such a big deal if we don't bring back the good ol' days, whatever they were. Maybe, instead of being competitive, we'd become compassionate. Instead of being combative, we'd become peacemaking. And, instead of insisting on bland uniformity, we would embrace flavorful diversity.

Best of all, that world might just be a lot more interesting than the one we're

living in right now!

So, Jesus says that we are salt and light. One brings flavor; the other makes things visible to the eye. Who will take up the calling to make life more flavorful, interesting, and beautiful? Who will take up the calling to bring things to light that others might not see? Were we unable to discern beauty and to think critically, we would be neither salt nor light. Rather, we would be very bland, boring, dull, and complacent folks who wouldn't criticize anything, appreciate anything, or do anything that would merit another person's attention. Hey...getting back to Soviet Russia, that's the way a lot of things looked around there!

And yes, maybe if we got rid of all these useless artists, philosophers, musicians, poets, and theologians and got us some real moneymakers like engineers and computer whizzes, our capitalist economy might flourish like never before. But what about our moral, spiritual, and cultural economy? If we continue valuing one over the other, that might actually be in more trouble...making salt and light just as important as jobs and money, if not more so. That which one cannot put a dollar value on needs to become the priority of those whom Jesus has called to bring flavor and make things visible to the eye. Indeed, we are the ones called to think, write, and communicate. We are people of a written and spoken Word, and, as with any piece of literature, our holy book challenges us to think things over quite a bit.

So now it's your turn to take a look at the world...and see what kind of salt and light you can bring to it.

Amen.