

A Source of Light and Flavor

Matthew 5:13-16

July 27, 2008

I certainly know some of those “light-of-the-world” and “salt-of-the-earth” type of people. You undoubtedly do also. They are those who, much or most of the time, manage almost instinctively to add flavor and brightness to our life. Something in the very spirit of them is uplifting, inspiring and invigorating. Thank God for them. God knows, we need a lot more of them.

I envy them. My problem, though, and maybe some of you struggle with it too, is that despite my best intentions it keeps getting away from me. There is so much about life that gets in the way of that light-of-the-world, salt-of-the-earth picture of Godliness.

For me it is more as if Jesus had said instead, “you are the ‘worker-ants’ of the world,” or “you are the micro-managers of the world,” or “you are the ‘little red hens’ of the world,” or “you are the bringers of intensity to the world.” Unfortunately, I could fit that picture most of the time without even straining, and I don’t think it’s because I am dysfunctional or neurotic in some major way. It is just that there is so much that seems to hang over me, gnawing at my conscience, nagging at me from the top of my desk, haunting my mind and interrupting my sleep.

The hauntings – the nagging voices – are ubiquitous, stubborn, and multiple. There is, for example, my guilt over the exercise that I’m neglecting, regarding the books that I really should have read but haven’t, letters I haven’t written, minor repairs that need attention around the house, the contribution I haven’t sent to Public TV or Public Radio, the elected official who I failed to phone regarding a crucial matter, the tires on my car going unbalanced and unrotated, the appalling fact that I am still at the Neanderthal level in computer use, the greasy potato chips that I allow myself, the sunsets not looked at, the poetry I so rarely get around to reading, and many, many more accumulated neglects and longstanding procrastinations. Not exactly the “light-of-the-world” or “salt-of-the-earth, right?

I do know that this isn’t everyone’s problem, and if it isn’t yours, please feel free to doze off until the closing hymn and extroit with that clear conscience of yours. But surely I’m not the only one who has this habit of placing, or allowing to be placed, a great collection of low-key guilts, nagging “ought to’s” and pesky scoldings that hang over me like the mythical sword of Damocles, making certain that there is always a certain weightiness to the spirit of me. I do think it’s a habit I have formed, because it is always there. Even if I manage to clear my conscience in regard to some of it, I seem to move something else in to take its place. Some of you are aware of what is called Maslow’s “hierarchy of need.” It

is the psychologist Maslow's theory which says that when the most urgent of a person's unmet needs somehow get met, the next strongest need moves into the number-one position and becomes the person's new greatest need. Something like that, I have what might be called "Eslinger's hierarchy of guilt agitations." Getting rid of one merely brings another into clearer focus which is now evoking greatest guilt. (And yet another waits in the wings to replace the replacement.)

So why do so many people struggle with this – keep this psychological sword hanging over us, blocking any true lightheartedness, wearing away at our self-concept, and cause us to think of ourselves as impostors and hypocrites? I suspect that there are several sources. Some of it undoubtedly was instilled into us early in life. We got it from repeatedly hearing things like, "You may NOT go out and play until AFTER the garbage is taken out, the lawn mowed, the garage swept and the car washed. And even then, don't expect to play very long because you have homework to do and you have your piano lesson tomorrow afternoon. The permanent message that some of us got from that was that whatever it is that we might be doing, it falls short – can never be enough, so it would be patently irresponsible to take the pressure off of ourselves.

Or it may have come when we formed the strong impression that to be an adult was very grim business. To be a grown-up was always to be VERY busy and preoccupied with unrelenting and unending grown-up concerns. That was reinforced with being told to "show some maturity," and to start acting more "grown up," and being reminded that "idle hands are the devil's workshop."

Another source came later with being taught that "productivity," "usefulness," "efficiency," and "speed" are major determiners of your value as a human being. "Isn't there some way," some of us learned to ask ourselves, "that I could be accomplishing more right now?" But for a great many of us, unfortunately, there was also a religious source of it. Where it came from, who knows, but it was the impression that in order to be certain that we are good persons, are godly and doing all that God demands of us, we need to constantly be busy; that if we aren't it's laziness; that the way to be safely righteous is always to be straining to do more than is possible to do. Even God couldn't be critical of us if we had enough hanging over us. It was as if instead of "Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus had said, "Blessed are the pacemakers."

Whatever the source of it in you or me, keeping ourselves feeling "driven," guilty, hypocritical, morally defective is a kind of craziness when we step back to reflect upon it;

NOT, that is, humility or self-discipline or righteousness. But it seems to be intricately woven into our culture and quite a lot of us are affected.

I found intriguing the experience of one free-lance writer who relates this experience. “I was asked to meet some friends at their lake cottage one Saturday. I showed up with a six-pack and some magazines. I found a shady spot on the deck and proceeded to scan articles, snooze, and enjoy what could be called low-key, unintentional meditating. The other guests, who had arrived earlier, were engaged in serious water-skiing, serious fishing, serious sunbathing, serious painting and serious Yoga.

“My lounging was continually interrupted by little messengers dispatched by their parents to inquire if I didn’t want to go water-skiing now. (Daddy said to ask you.) Or didn’t you want to go fishing or--? My reply to them became monotonous. ‘No thanks, I’m just fine.’ After two hours of weary kids trudging up the steps from the water to ask again, the parents lost faith in the little messengers and began to come themselves. ‘Are you sure you’re having a good time?’ was their question. ‘Don’t you want to DO something?’ was the embellishment of it. They found it impossible to believe that my blatant, unorganized sitting could be okay. When we all reassembled for dinner, two buddies asked me in all seriousness if I was feeling all right. My doing nothing had been for me a refreshing release. I think I felt much better than did they. Their obligation to accomplish something measurable and approved, even in recreation, seemed very tedious.”

I certainly don’t mean to imply that “just sitting” or “doing nothing” or wiping out a six-pack as did he that day, automatically made him the “light of the world” or the “flavor” of it in that situation. But you could sense in his description of the experience that there are subtle and maybe-not-so-subtle cultural tyrannies that do work to really keep the pressure on our senses of responsibility, to take with deadly seriousness a lot of extraneous stuff that could be shrugged off to, and in general, to obscure the light and the flavor that according to Jesus, is intrinsic to us.

A bit of it was captured on the cover of “The New Yorker” a couple of years ago. It was a crowded beach scene and every single person sunning him or herself as far as the eye could see, was talking on a cell phone and, on the faces that could be made out, looking stressed or upset. In the foreground, though, is a little girl with a wonderfully dreamy smile on her face with her ear to a conch shell. Amidst all of the others, the little girl’s beautiful countenance was an endearing, visual taste of the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Even so, the disturbing sub-text of that magazine cover is the tyranny of the cell phone, isn’t it? It’s another one of those additions to our culture that come along to alter our lives and

not necessarily or entirely for the good. The unintended consequence of those convenient little devices has been to more intensely complicate, enervate and obligate our lives. As tends to happen, though, the OPTION of owning one quickly grew into the near OBLIGATION to own one. Along with the added “conveniences” and “efficiencies,” we may have lost some spontaneity, some uninterrupted interludes, or even some privacy.

The intention here, by no means is to claim that we would have done much better to remain in some horse-and-buggy era. It is only to get firmly back in touch with Jesus’ concern that we don’t make choices, take on baggage, become so ponderous that we lose what is most amazing and most divine about us: our being created the salt of the earth, the light of the world.

He didn’t say that this is what we could become if we’re careful and really work at it. No! It is who in the world by nature we are. The problem, when there is one, is our own obscuring of our own God-given light, that about us which brightens and brings flavor to our shared life. That doesn’t get blocked with our cooperation. It happens with approaching our living with a deadly, heavy seriousness.

It is what is going on when we live and behave as if we are singlehandedly in charge of holding back the world’s evil, disaster and chaos.

It afflicts us when we keep hung over ourselves that vast collection of concerns and obligations and then sweat and grieve over the fact that a vast collection of concerns and obligations are hanging over us.

It is to arrive at where, not only can I not lighten up any more, but I am irritated and suspicious of those who easily can and do.

Rather unforgettable echoes of it can be heard in this plaintive classified personal ad that appeared in “The New York Review of Books” many years ago. It said, “Retired, female schoolteacher, stressed out, heavy-hearted and soul-weary from reading, writing and ‘rithmetic! Is there a gentleman in his sixties who can help me find the way to the playground before the bell rings?”

We’ll pray that someone whose own light and flavor was contagious, was able to restore hers. Being the light of the world and the salt of the earth is an incredible gift. For God’s sake, don’t ever let it get away from you.