

Year A, February 5, 2017  
5 Epiphany  
Christ Church, Mexia

Dear God, So far today I have done alright. I have not gossiped. I have not lost my temper. I have not been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, proud or overindulgent. I am very thankful for that. But in a few minutes, God, I am going to get out of bed...

When I think of the gospel reading this morning, I think of tension. Br. Curtis Almquist (SSJE) says, "Tension, though it is sometimes very uncomfortable, is quintessential or else there will be no freedom and no strength... We must seek to live in the tension that the Incarnation informs." And tension is related to/part of resilience. "Resilience is the capacity for recovery. It's (our) ability to retain a positive self-image, a positive view of the world, even after (we've) been tested by difficult or traumatic circumstances. Think of it like a rubber band. When the band is stretched very tightly, it springs back into its former shape." (Sherry Lowry, business consultant)

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" "God had called Israel to be the salt of the earth; but (in Jesus' time) Israel was behaving like everyone else, with its power politics, its factual squabbles, its militant revolutions. How could God keep the world from going bad – the main function of salt in the ancient world (by the way) – if Israel, his chosen 'salt,' had lost its distinctive taste?" (N.T. Wright)

And I think it is worth noting here why salt, which doesn't enjoy as much status in our culture, was so important then. According to William Barclay, salt was highly valued and often used as an offering to gods in those days because it had three properties. First, it was connected with purity; its gleaming whiteness made that a natural connection. The Romans considered it to be the purest of all things because it came from the purest of all things, the sun and the sea. It was also the most common preservative, especially for meat/fish. So salt should preserve from corruption. And for most people, it lends flavor to our food; enriches our life. These were and are important functions. So Jesus was reminding the Jews, his disciples/followers, and now us that they/we are to be the salt of the earth.

And in like manner, we are to be a light to the world. Jerusalem, and especially the Temple, was set on a hill so that it could be seen from long

distances and was considered, by the Jews of that time, to be a light to the Gentiles. Jesus described himself as the light of the world. In fact, in the words of Tom Wright he pulled together his teachings here into his own life, "He was the salt of the earth. He was the light of the world; set up on a hill-top, crucified for all the world to see, becoming a beacon of hope and new life for everybody, drawing people to worship his father, embodying the way of self-giving love which is the deepest fulfillment of the law and the prophets."

So often then we have to live in tension with the world because of our beliefs and what Jesus asks us to do as his followers. However, we can often get distracted or upset and lose our effectiveness as a witness to Jesus. So we need resilience, which hopefully we find here through worship and especially community. That's good for us, but what about those out there – the ones who don't see what is in here? How do we be a light to the world, reflecting the purity of the gospel, helping to keep things from going bad in the world, and lending flavor/spice to lives of others? How do we keep from being pulled back into the darkness – succumbing to the tension from that side?

Eleanor Parker wrote the famous children's book, *Pollyanna*, in 1913. The book was later made and re-made into movies and the title character became a part of the American vocabulary. Webster defines Pollyanna now as: "a person characterized by irresponsible optimism and a tendency to find good in everything." And Dictionary.com's definition is: "an excessively or blindly optimistic person."

That's where the problem lies; the book doesn't really portray Pollyanna in that light. Pollyanna's father was a minister who died leaving her orphaned. So she has to go to Vermont to live with her only relative – an Aunt portrayed as a severe and unpleasant woman. Now Pollyanna's favorite word was "glad" and she did try to find something in every situation, no matter how bad, to be glad about.

In the story, her cheerfulness begins to transform her aunt and then the whole town. But the real question is – what is the source of her optimism, her positive attitude? Is it irrational, excessive or irresponsible? I must concede this book is fiction, but like so many books from that era, it is written from a Christian perspective.

Somewhere in the middle of the book, Pollyanna interacts with the town minister who has gone into the woods for reflection. Things had not gone well in the church; people were critical and divided, and he was despondent, and perhaps even having a crisis of faith. She tells him how her father had similar moments, but dealt with them by finding his 'rejoicing texts' in the

Bible – “rejoice greatly,” “shout for joy,” “be glad in the Lord,” for example. Her father, she said, had even counted them and found there were 800 such verses in the Bible. “Father said that if God took the trouble to tell us eight hundred times to be glad and rejoice, (God) must have wanted us to do it,” says Pollyanna to the minister.

And so, we can see that her demeanor was not just some air-headed, randomly adopted response to life, or a flight from reality as current definitions would suggest. Rather it was a simple, child-like faith, learned from her minister father, who rejoiced in life while trusting in God. Were not the two of them just letting their light shine? So I ask you, aren’t we as Christians called to be more like Pollyanna, despite the negative connotations of the current secular definitions? As we read in Proverbs 15:30, for example: “A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones.” (NIV) Let the light shine!

Knowing that we haven’t left church yet (though we are out of bed), knowing that there are difficulties in our world that we do not control, knowing the tension that exists between our faith and the secular, cultural norms of today, let us find ways to remain resilient. The words of an oldie, but goodie by Bobbie Vee comes to mind and may suggest a way or theme to do this, despite the fact that it may seem a bit “cheesy”; “...like a rubber ball, I’ll come bouncing back to you” - change a word and, “like a rubber ball, I’ll come bouncing back to God.”

So be as Pollyanna as you can be; see Christ in everyone and look for the good in every situation. Also, make sure that your faith and belief in God, has not lost its knowledge and understanding of grace and mercy and justice and all the implications of the Incarnation. And be an example, an example, to the peoples of the world, while reflecting the light of Christ into all the dark corners of this world.

In the name of the One God - the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.