

“Salt and Light”
By Adam H. Fronczek

There’s a great image that appears near the end of the Bible. Having taught his followers all that they should know about being his disciples, at the end of the Bible Jesus himself comes to the door of the church and knocks (Revelation 3). Christians who have altar calls in worship, and who ask people each week to make a decision and give their lives over to Jesus, make use of this verse frequently--they ask, will you open the door to him or will you leave him knocking? They love this image. We don’t mention the story much around here at all. (I thought about making an ironic joke here about “Knox/Knocks” Church, but I just couldn’t do it).

It’s true—we don’t talk about this image much, even though, for us too, this image of Jesus knocking is a great image. It need not be so individualistic, for it is really about who we are being together as a church. The image of Jesus knocking at the door comes in the Book of Revelation, and it is written in response to an indictment against one of the earliest churches, a congregation in Laodicea. Their problem was that they were neither hot nor cold, but merely lukewarm in their faith. So, to continue the illustration, Jesus comes to the door and knocks, and in churches like that lukewarm one, the door may not be locked, maybe it’s even cracked open...it’s just that no one goes running to the door to see who is there. And that’s a problem—because it’s Jesus!

There are plenty of examples in the Bible of this same lesson. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells of a king who asks, “...I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...’ And his listeners ask, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king answers them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 5:35-39) Anyone who stands at the door of our churches and knocks may be Jesus—so the church must never be lukewarm, and we should always be running to the door to see who is there.

Don’t be lukewarm about your faith, that’s the lesson. And it comes to us also in the words of the Scripture we heard this morning: “You are the salt of the earth” ...“you are the light of the world...” Many of us have heard these words before, and know a little historical context to support them. Salt was essential in the ancient world; it was a preservative and helped to sustain life, so it was necessary. But salt did more than that, it’s not just about the historical context. Today, just the same as always, salt gives food flavor—and that’s what we’re called to do: to live lives of flavor, and to be sure that other people can do the same. Today, just the same as always, salt also makes you

thirsty—so as we do the work of making life more flavorful, our efforts, when done faithfully, should make others hunger and thirst for more of the same.

The image of light works much the same way: “you are the light of the world...No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.” One of our longtime members, Elder Kathy Wall, loves to tell me: “Adam, Knox Church does too good a job of hiding our lamp under a bushel!” When she says that, she’s talking about what a great church we have and that she thinks Knox is Cincinnati’s best kept secret—she thinks we should be doing a better job of letting folks know about the great ministries happening here. I can see her point, and certainly I don’t disagree that Knox Church is a place worth talking about. But there are layers of meaning to this image, just like there was with the one about salt. Plenty of churches are primarily concerned with shining their light so that others can see it—even if not much attention is being paid to the quality or purpose of the light. Light isn’t just about being seen, it’s about making an impact in darkness. Just as the salt analogy is meant to teach us about adding good flavor to life and thirsting to do more of the same, the light analogy pushes us to think critically about what we are doing when we are church together. Light has the greatest impact when we are aware of the darkness.

I’ll openly admit to you that I’m not always as attentive to my personal prayer life as I should be, and need to be reminded about it. I was convicted about that in the past week and rededicated myself to some meditation exercises I’ve used in the past. One of them is a candle meditation—you take a candle and by staring at the flame and studying it in various ways you practice focusing the mind and heart; it’s meant to remove distractions that get in the way of time with God. I told myself I was going to do this exercise last Thursday morning. And then I realized that, in my house, which has a window in almost every room, there was nowhere that was dark enough to do the meditation effectively during the daytime. Having already made a commitment to myself that I was going to do this spiritual exercise, I wound up sitting on the floor next to the shower with the door closed—it was the only way to find enough darkness for the light to do its work.

That’s a silly story to have told you, but I couldn’t think of a better way to illustrate the point. Light matters the most when there is genuine darkness around. And we as a congregation are meant to seek out places of darkness if our light is really going to matter. That’s why we do the things we do as a church. At this morning’s Annual Meeting of our congregation, we’ll talk about our outreach efforts in the poorest and most violent zip codes in Cincinnati, and building schools in parts of Uganda where there are currently no schools at all. In our pastoral ministries, we seek out those of you who are struggling with illness and grief, depression and addiction. We hope for Knox Church not to be a place of hiding our needs and imperfections in shame, but where we can lean on one another in honesty and openness, knowing that none of us is perfect. Christ’s light shines all the brighter in the work that we share when we are willing to go to dark places in our lives.

When we do the work of taking the light and salt of faith to those who need it, we are not perfect possessors of the light of God, taking it to those in darkness; rather,

we always end up receiving light in the places where we go. The people we serve in places like East Westwood and rural Uganda show much more light to me than I could ever show them. And in my pastoral visits with all of you, I learn much more from your honest grief and struggles than I am ever able to offer to you. And that is a good reminder as we come to the Communion table this morning. For here we are not helped by calls to perfection or flawlessness. No, when we come to the table, we hear the words that Jesus spoke so long ago: "This is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." We come to know Jesus not through perfection, but through his brokenness—his willingness for us to see his humanity. We see light most purely when we are willing to be honest about darkness. We appreciate salt the most when there is a need for flavor.

The author Annie Dillard writes, "You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary." (Quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A.) On this day when we gather at Christ's table, and when we gather for our Annual Meeting, we are called to consider how we might feel if Christ came to our door today and knocked. Remember, my friends, that he does not come here or anywhere else looking for perfect lives; he comes seeking people who will open the door, to him, and to anyone else who may come in his name. I am grateful to all of you for gathering here with me. We may not be quite perfect in our gathering. That's fine. We are simply here to be sure that someone among us is always ready to open the door.

Amen.