

Epiphany Sermon Series: "Is It All About Location?"

"Availability"

Salem United Methodist Church

Matthew 5: 13-20; I Corinthians 2: 6-13

February 9, 2014

Rev. Sue Shorb-Sterling

For the past few weeks we have been answering this question in different ways: "Is It All About Location?" as we walk through this season of Epiphany. As we talk about location we may just experience an "aha" moment or two in which we discover who Jesus is and how we may need to move our location as we strive to follow him. Today we will explore "Availability."

We have discussed that location means everything in the real estate business. When purchasing a home, a realtor will look to see what properties are available in the buyer's desired location. Sometimes there are many choices. Other times there may be none. The buyer then has to decide to wait until a property becomes available or decide on another location. There is one group who really wants to obtain one piece of property that simply isn't available. That piece of property is the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. To understand this group's desire, we need some history here. The Temple Mount is where Solomon built the Temple in 960 BCE. This temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. About 70 years later the Jews were able to rebuild the Temple. Only to be ransacked and burned by the Selucids in the beginning of the third century BCE. King Herod in the first century reconstructed and expanded the Temple. This is the Temple in which Jesus worshipped. Then in 70 AD the Romans seized Jerusalem and destroyed Herod's Temple. It has never been rebuilt. However the property was claimed in the 7th century by the Muslims who built the Dome of the Rock. This is third holiest Muslim site because they believe Muhammad ascended into heaven at this location. For the Jews the Temple Mount is their holiest religious site, because it is where they believe God resided in the Temple room called the Holy of Holies. Clearly this is a holy site is unavailable to one faith group, the Jews. This holy yet unavailable piece of property is one of the highly contested pieces of land in the world. The Jews would like to rebuild the Temple on this site and the Muslims will not give it up. It is so highly contested that there is a law that prohibits Jews from praying on the Temple Mount. Israelis guards keep an eye on any Jew who enters the area to see if they are moving their lips which indicates they are praying. A Jew who is praying at the Dome of the Rock can be arrested. There is one site in which Jews and Christians are allowed to pray and that is the Western Wall or Wailing Wall. It is an original wall of the Temple that was destroyed in 70 AD. Religious and political leaders from all over the world have prayed here.

We don't need to get into the political ramifications on this issue. The purpose of talking about it is for us to see what happens when we do not make ourselves available. We shut others out. We can cause conflict and even destroy possibilities. Our Gospel lesson is speaking about making ourselves available to others by being salt and light. It comes from Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." This sermon is not named after the Temple Mount, but the mount from which he spoke. However, it is this Temple Mount to which Jesus is referring when he speaks of "a city built on a hill cannot be hid." Jerusalem sits on a hill. The Temple sat at the highest point of the hill. In the time of Jesus the sun would reflect off the Temple so that its gleaming reflection could be seen from miles away by those who were making their pilgrimage to worship in the Temple. This is the image those who were listening to Jesus would have visualized. The Temple became a beacon of light that could be seen for miles drawing people toward it. In this part of Jesus' sermon he is proclaiming what we already are: available people who avail themselves for others. He uses two metaphors: salt and light. Since we talked about the Temple reflecting light, let's look at light first.

What do we know about light? It is a kind of energy that gives color to things. It is vital in the process of photosynthesis which facilitates with plant growth. It provides power as in solar power. It

enables us to see. And Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” He doesn’t say you reflect the light of the world. “You are the light of the world.” How can we have the ability to bring energy to the world, give color to a dull world, facilitate growth, and/or provide power to the powerless? Jesus is saying it is already within us. God placed it in us at our creation. The light is the image of God in us. And each person has this light. Each of us has this ability to bring hope, color, energy, and power to a dark and hurting world. We choose whether we allow it to shine. We choose to make it available for others to see. We choose to avail it or hide it.

The other metaphor that Jesus uses is salt. We know that as Americans we consume too much salt from processed foods which can be a cause of high blood pressure. We use it as just a cheap way to enhance flavor. But in Jesus’ time, salt was a commodity-highly valued, often traded and sometimes used as currency. Salt was a precious mineral and expensive because it was necessary for life. First, in hot climates ingesting salt necessary for life because it replaces important electrolytes lost in perspiration. Without salt one could die. Second, in this hot climate salt was used to preserve foods from spoiling. Preserved foods also traveled well. Salt was as important to life as water was to drink. But it wasn’t always pure. In this area their salt was harvested from the salty water of the Dead Sea through an evaporation process. This evaporation process did not produce pure salt. There were other minerals that were left behind after the water evaporated. So some batches of salt were contaminated with these minerals and would not have been as “salty” as other batches. These polluted batches didn’t do the job.

So Jesus says we are “the salt of the earth.” We, as believers, followers, are necessary for life to continue. We bring life to each other and to those we meet in the world. We can provide what is missing. And like salt preserves food, we as those who follow God’s commands and teachings can preserve our communities as places where God’s love, peace, joy, hope, and justice thrives. As the salt of the earth, we are to be used and spent. Salt sitting on a shelf does nothing. Jesus is saying that God’s wisdom is already in us. Jesus is teaching us that we have these gifts and he is helping us understand what to do with them.

Yesterday seventeen leaders from this congregation met for six hours to unpack how Salem is to be salt and light. We looked at who we are. One person stated that we are many faceted diamonds-reflecting God’s light. Jesus would tell us that we are the light. It is already in us. We are to shine. And we discovered that we are in so many ways. We said that we are hard working, talented disciples of Christ who utilize the many gifts that we have. We talked about how there is already light shining in the various groups in our community. But we also tried to answer this question, “God, who are you calling us to be and do given the assets you’ve entrusted to us so that more people in Brookeville and Olney know you?” In other words with our salt and light how can we find other ways to offer life, enhance life, and shine God’s light. Then we looked at what we value, where we are being called to be in mission, and what feel God is calling Salem to be in the future. This is a work in process. We are not finished. And I invite anyone who would like to be part of this discernment process to contact me or our Church Council Chair. This process is about not only identifying and affirming the light and salt in us, but identifying and constructing ways to share it.

I would like to share with you video of how one congregation, Sycamore Creek UMC in Lansing, Michigan discerned how to be salt and light to their community. This congregation changed locations to connect with people who can’t come to worship because of work schedules or won’t enter a church. This congregation allowed themselves to be available to others. I am not saying that we need to have church in a local restaurant, but I just want us to begin thinking how can we take all our wonder assets, our salt and light, and avail these to others?

Resources: *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.; “Jews Challenge Worship Rules At Holiest of Jerusalem Sites,” by Neri Zilber, Religion News Service; “Church in a Diner,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48Y4E4VJvEE>

