Sunday, February 4, 1990
JUST SAY YES
Matthew 5:13-16

Most of us are familiar with the nation-wide campaign against drug abuse, especially for young people. The slogan, “JUST SAY NO!” has been and still is widely used. It sounds simple enough, but maybe it is too simple. While I have nothing against this phrase, I also know that more is needed. Saying “no” all by itself is never enough. We can never say “no” to something without first saying “yes” to ourselves and also to something greater than ourselves.

Years ago, the psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote: “We human beings are never helped in our suffering by what we think for ourselves, but only by revelations of a wisdom greater than our own. It is this which lifts us out of our darkness.”

Whose wisdom do we seek? More specifically, what are some of the things, as followers of Christ, we say “yes” to? When our spirits need uplifting, where do we look? After whose lives do we model our own lives? Who are our examples?

This morning, in an attempt to answer these questions, let’s look again at some of the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world.” Notice he did not say, “You ought to be the salt of the earth,” or “You should try to be the light of the world.” He said, “You are.”

Both salt and light were so basic and essential to human life in that day and age that Jesus felt no need to spell out what these metaphors meant. But maybe it’s not as obvious to us.

For us, what could be more common than salt? We can buy a box of salt in the store today, and it doesn’t cost very much. We use salt every day. All tables where people eat have salt and pepper shakers on them. And in our electrically-wired world, we flick a switch, and the light comes on. In today’s world, we have a tendency to take both salt and light for granted.

In fact, salt especially has gotten a bad reputation in our time. Who wants to be called the “salt of the earth?” We are reminded almost daily to watch our salt intake by reading the labels of prepared foods. Too much salt is bad for our health.

So when we hear Jesus telling his disciples and us, “You are the salt of the earth, and you are the light of the world,” we are not very much impressed, nor do we feel especially complimented.

In Jesus’ time, however, both salt and light were considered valuable and necessary for life. The preservative powers of salt made it an absolute necessity of life and a virtual synonym for essential life-giving forces, and not surprisingly, endowed it with religious significance. In Israelite worship, salt was used to season incense, and all offerings had to be seasoned with salt. Today, with refrigeration, modern canning methods, and frozen food, we no longer think of salt in the same way.

In addition, as we all know, salt changes the flavor of food. A pinch of salt can make all the difference. We often say that food tastes “flat” without at least a little bit of salt. If food is properly salted, we do not taste the salt, but if it is not salted, we notice the absence of it.

“You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” That’s a high compliment. Jesus is speaking to us as individuals and as congregations.

There’s a warning too. Salt can lose its integrity, its identifying quality as salt. This does not occur suddenly, of course, but so gradually that those to whom it happens do not perceive themselves as changing and cannot identify later a single time or place when their faith ceased. It died slowly over a period of time. How often in my ministry have I counseled people who have told me quite frankly that their lives seemed flat and empty, like food without salt.

A human relationship between two people can lose its saltiness. A marriage can become dull and flat — no flavor left. Congregations can lose their saltiness and no longer have any zest for life as the body of Christ. The worship lacks vitality and energy. They simply go through the motions, but there’s no spirit, no zip, no flavor. How easy it is to lose initiative in mission and take up a posture of protection and defense, especially after one suffers verbal, physical, social, or economic abuse for one’s faith.

Jesus said, “You are the light of the world... so let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to God.” Jesus was not talking here about showing off, but about being what you were meant to be.

It’s not for the purpose of bringing glory to yourself, but so that others will see your light and give glory to God.

The warning here is that we will put our light under a cover.

For to let your light shine, to hold it up for all to see, is like building a city on a hill. It is sound strategy for self-defense, but the increased visibility attracts even more hostility.

Thus there are many times when we let our light shine, and others try to put it out. Some people don’t like light. They don’t like joy. They prefer darkness and the works of darkness. There’s a lot one can hide in shadows and darkness. Because of this hostility to light, we are tempted to put our light under cover.

The other night, my wife and I saw the movie Driving Miss Daisy, the story of an elderly wealthy Jewish woman in Atlanta and her grudging, slow acceptance of a Black man named Hoke as her chauffeur. Over the years, the chauffeur and Miss Daisy develop a growing respect for each other and a deep friendship. It is the story of a human relationship moving slowly from distance to intimacy.

The story takes place in the late 1940s, 50s, and 60s, during a time of racial tension, the growing civil rights movement, and the rise of Martin Luther King, Jr. There’s a scene in the movie in which Martin Luther King, Jr. is to be the speaker at a dinner meeting, and Miss Daisy decides to attend. She would like to ask her chauffeur to attend with her since she has an extra ticket, but she can’t quite yet bring herself to invite him as her guest. So the chair next to her remains empty. In his speech, Dr. King reminds his audience that it is not only the forces of darkness we have to fear, but even more so, the fact that people who are the light of the world will not let that light shine, but keep it under a bushel. And Miss Daisy gets the point as she

looks again at the empty chair next to her, realizing she didn't have the courage to invite her chauffeur.

Putting a lamp under a bushel certainly reduces the chance of having it blown out, but the price for such protection is shadows and darkness. You can let someone else put a cover over your light, or you can do it yourself.

Some people prefer shadows, darkness, and gloominess. We can be sucked into this bias. I heard Fred Craddock comment on this a few weeks ago. He said, "Have you ever noticed that people who are gloomy are considered more thoughtful than people who are not? Why is that?

Why is it that we speak of shadows as deep? Is sunshine never deep? Somebody tells a real grim story, and we nod and say, 'that's reality.' Somebody else tells a story of a different nature that is not at all grim, and we say, 'that's too good to be true.' I know some very deep people who are filled with joy and give that joy to others. They do not hide their light under a bushel. They do not prefer the shadows and the darkness."

Sometimes too, we'll be letting our light shine and then make a mistake, or somebody will accuse us of something, and we put our light under a cover and try to excuse ourselves by saying, "After all, I'm only human."

To quote Fred Craddock again, "Why do we so quickly say when we make a mistake or see our fear, 'I'm just human'? What does it mean to be human anyway? According to the scriptures, God made the earth and the skies, the water and the dry land, the trees and plants, every kind of animal and living thing imaginable, and then, having made all that, God said, 'I think I will create something just like myself. I think I'll make something like me.' And so God created you. And God said, 'This is the very best I can do. Looking at you is like looking in the mirror. This is my very best.' Now what are you thinking when you say, 'I'm just human?' Why do we use that expression when we make a mistake?"

A soprano will sing a beautiful aria and then make one mistake and say, "I'm just human." What was she the rest of the time when she was singing all those beautiful notes? A shortstop makes that play, throwing the ball to first base 463 times without an error, and then the next time drops the ball, "Well, I'm just human." What was he when he was making the play?

When you do your job well, when you show up on time, when you complete your work, and somebody says thank you, why not say, "After all, I'm human." Why not? To be human is to say "Yes" to the fact that God has made you in God's image. It is to let your light shine. It is to accept what you already are — you are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.

Have you noticed that many people spend a lot of time trying to make something out of themselves, rather than accepting what they already are?

I remember talking with a young woman years ago about this. She said that from her earliest memories, she, for some reason, did not like the way she came from the hand of the Creator. She imagined herself as an emptiness, a big fat zero — one who somehow did not measure up as she was.

She said she remembered one particular Peanuts comic strip that described her perfectly. In the cartoon, Charlie Brown is lamenting to his friend Linus about his chronic life-long sense of

insecurity. “It goes all the way back to the beginning,” he says, “the moment I was born and stepped on the stage of history, they took one look at me and said, ‘Not right for the part.'”

The young woman who was telling me her story said she was not able to trace out all the causes of this self-despising. She did remember that again and again in her early days, she was told, “If you are ever going to amount to anything, you have to make something of yourself.” She said that she was sure that those who said this meant it to be a source of motivation to inspire her to make the most of what she had been given. But that’s not what she heard.

Child educators have pointed out that children are often excellent observers but poor interpreters. They hardly miss a thing when it comes to taking it all in, but drawing the correct conclusion is another thing. In the case of this young woman, she said that she took these words as an assessment of her condition rather than as a challenge to her potential. She interpreted them to mean, “As you are just now, you do not amount to anything, and if there is ever going to be any significance to your life, you are going to have to go somewhere else and import it and become something other than what you are right now.”

She was not attempting to blame others for her low self-esteem. She knew that each one of us has some responsibility for the images of self we create out of what goes on around us. She knew that she was the one who had, somewhere along the line, decided that she was not good enough as she was. A mood of dissatisfaction settled over her whole existence and became the vantage point from which she interpreted everything.

She decided that the only way a nobody could become a somebody was to compete and achieve. Perhaps this would fill her emptiness.

She tried everything. In the early grades in school, she learned how to maneuver her way into becoming the teacher’s pet. Later on, she ran for every school office she could. She became a cheerleader and made the best grades possible. By untiring effort and manipulation, she managed to become fairly successful. She remembered not only taking pride in what she was accomplishing, but she also was beginning to experience the dark side of this approach to life — she began to feel contempt toward those who were not doing as well.

This overwhelming necessity to achieve, not for the joy of achievement in itself, but in an attempt to make something of herself, continued through college and on into her working life. She had a good job, was making more money than most young women her age, and yet she still felt an emptiness.

After about ten years in the working world, she began to feel an overpowering sense of fatigue. She said, “Do you realize how much energy it takes to always have to succeed and come out number one?”

She had been a church attender off and on and had grown up in a Christian environment, but she had not been very deeply affected by it all. Then one Sunday morning, in the midst of her growing despair, she found herself in a worship service again. The scripture reading was, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to the whole house. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God.”

In that moment, she said, it dawned on her that she had worth already by the grace of creation and did not have to strive or achieve to acquire it. Jesus did not say that she had to turn the world upside down. She did not have to outdo all others in order to earn light. Jesus said, “You are the light.” From then on, she was able to relax and begin to say “yes” to what she already was.

All you have to do is say “Yes.” Acknowledge and accept what you already are. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Amen.