**5 Epiphany**

**Annual Congregational Meeting**

**February 5, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

This Sunday’s gospel reading from Matthew is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard the Beatitudes … basically the prelude to the sermon. The Beatitudes paint a picture of those who are deemed “blessed” … the poor, the hungry and thirsty, those who are grieving a loss, those who are humble, those who are honest and live with integrity, those who are compassionate, and those who seek justice and are willing to work for peace regardless of the costs. As I mentioned in my sermon, we are those people … we are the ones who are blessed. And because we are blessed we can … we are called … to bless others in the world around us.

In today’s portion of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that those in the crowd are the “salt of the earth,” and “the light of the world.” So, who are the people that Jesus is addressing? Who is Jesus referring to as the “salt of the earth?” The answer is in the Beatitudes … those who are humble, those who mourn, those who are meek, and those who thirst after doing what is right. Salt creates thirst, does it not? The righteous are blessed to thirst after doing what is right. They are salty and so they thirst.

And who is Jesus calling the light of the world? Those who are merciful, those who are honest and live with integrity, those who work for peace and justice at all costs, and those who receive abuse for standing up for what is right. Justice is a form of light, is it not? Those who seek justice in the world are blessed … they are blessed to show forth honesty and integrity and peace as they stand up for what is right. They shed light through their actions.

Salt and light are basic, elemental things … yet they are so multi-faceted. Even though they are simple, there is nothing innocuous about either element. Salt preserves. Salt flavors. But salt can also sting and burn and abrade. Just pour a little salt into a wound and one feels the pain it can cause.

And light. Light dispels darkness. Light sheds illumination. But light can also blind, either temporarily or permanently. Light shines in the darkness … it also shines on that which is dark in this world.

If one intends to be a salty, well-lit disciple, it is probably good advice to re-read Jesus’ stump speech. The waving placards of “Blessed Are” might seem quite inspiring until you realize that Jesus actually means business. This righteousness and justice business is not for the faint of heart. What Jesus has in mind might be stinging … it might even be blinding as it seeks justice and fairness in a divided world.

You see, this body of Christ gathered in this corner of God’s vineyard … this congregation of St. Cyprian’s that has been meeting in this building for 117 years … has been, is now, and will be for generations to come the “salt of the earth” and a “light to the world” as a cornerstone in this community. We have been blessed. We are blessed. And as we share those blessings in the world around us by including the marginalized, feeding the hungry, and seeking justice for the oppressed we will be blessed for generations yet to come.

This is the occasion of St. Cyprian’s Annual Congregational Meeting. It is a time to count our blessings … and make an account of our blessings. Not in pride, but as a way of “let[ing] your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

The congregation of St. Cyprian’s has been worshipping in this church building for 117 years. The history of St. Cyprian’s … and of our Lincolnville neighborhood … is full, rich and interesting, but time doesn’t really allow me to elaborate. However, the ancestral roots of St. Cyprian’s are in the fact that in the 1890’s … when this congregation first began to worship in a storefront on Washington Street … the Jim Crow racial environment meant that people of color were not welcomed at Trinity Parish. St. Cyprian’s was formed by people who were marginalized elsewhere.

And this church is named after Cyprian of Carthage, a third century bishop in what is now Tunisia. Since he was from North Africa it is assumed that he was a person of color, and therefore an appropriate patron for an African American congregation. Yet Cyprian was known for much more than the color of his skin, in particular for welcoming those who had been marginalized. Cyprian was martyred in 258 when he refused to renounce his Christian faith.

I mention Cyprian and the ancestral roots of this congregation because over a century after it formation St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church is living into the same mission of welcoming those who may feel marginalized. Sometimes those who Jesus deemed “blessed” … the poor in spirit, those thirsting for justice, those seeking peace in the world … were marginalized. They were marginalized then … and they are marginalized today. And St. Cyprian’s mission is to welcome them when they may not feel welcomed elsewhere.

Our Mission Statement reads, “St Cyprian’s is a diverse, inclusive, and historic Christian community welcome all into it life and worship as we creatively grow in faith and service to each other, the world around us, and a loving God.”

In 2006 this congregation split over issues facing the Episcopal Church. With just a handful of dedicated people … Dr. Dorothy Israel, Pastor Deena, and John Miller to name a few … the congregation held on through the crisis, and today we once again stand as a cornerstone in this historic Lincolnville neighborhood.

A decade later we continue to grow in the size of this congregation, the financial stewardship of the people committed to our mission, and in the ministries we support in the world around us. From less than a dozen in that remnant congregation of 2006 we have grown exponentially. From dependency upon the Diocese for financial aid … with an annual operating budget of less than $30,000 … we now are financially self-sufficient with a budget of $145,000. And we contribute to the Common Ministry of the Diocese of Florida almost $15,000 a year. From being almost invisible in the City of St. Augustine we have become a driving force in the community.

As you will hear in the reports following the service you who are blessed share your blessings by feeding the hungry, offer healing for the ill, shelter for the homeless, comfort to those who are hurting, and much more. Our Jazz Vespers and Concerts on the Commons draw crowds from around the area. Our Mission House has become a meeting place for a score of community groups aligned with our mission. And the name of this congregation is synonymous with social justice and outreach.

Yet, 2016 was not without its challenges. Although the church suffered only minor damage in Hurricane Matthew … a few broken limbs on our historic cedar trees … many in the congregation did not fare as well. Some lost everything … all their furnishings and belongings, their cars, and in some cases even their houses. Yet the network of parishioners caring for one another was … and is … remarkable.

In addition, we had plans for renovations of this building, and additions to the Commons, and the beginnings of a children and youth program that were delayed. Yet, that only means the Mission Board has work still to do in 2017.

Remember, “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.” You see, this body of Christ gathered in this corner of God’s vineyard … this congregation of St. Cyprian’s that has been meeting in this building for 117 years … has been, is now, and will be for generations to come the “salt of the earth” and a “light to the world” as a cornerstone in this community. We have been blessed. We are blessed today. And, as we share those blessings in the world around us by including the marginalized, feeding the hungry, and seeking justice for the oppressed we will be blessed for generations yet to come.

Overall, 2016 was a good year for St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church, and 2017 looks to be even better as we continue be the body of Christ in this corner of God’s vineyard.

Amen.