

"SALT AND LIGHT"

Matthew 5:1-12; 13-16

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Intro: Those verses we call "the Beatitudes" or "Blessings" are the introduction and context for the rest of Jesus "Sermon on the Mount," which we'll be taking some time to reflect on this summer. The Sermon on the Mount is challenging, demanding – there's no question about that. But as we reflect on it, let's keep in mind how it begins: with blessing: the grace of God always comes first. These next few verses are the transition from the Beatitudes into the rest of the sermon and the things Jesus has to say in it about God's commandments, about worship, and about social issues. We should note that here, as in the Beatitudes, the word "you" is plural.

read Matthew 5:13-16

Matthew incorporated Jesus's Sermon on the Mount into his gospel for the early Christian community he was writing for. It has resonated with believers throughout the centuries, as it does with us. But we shouldn't forget that Jesus' original audience was made up of Jews, and that he spoke to them in the context of their shared Jewish faith and experiences. When we see pictures of the scene, it looks peaceful and happy, but in actuality the folks Jesus talked to were as diverse and as divided as we are today about what it means to be God's people.

The immediate context of Jesus' ministry is the occupation of Israel's land by the forces of the Roman empire. The bigger context is the fact that Israel had been a part of Gentile empires since the Babylonian period... more than 500 years. (E. Van Driel) So there was a sense that somehow all God's promises to the people of Israel remained – so far – unfulfilled. They didn't have a good king, or control of their land, or a peaceful and just society to live in, or obvious evidence of God's protection and presence. What they were supposed to do in this circumstance – how they could maintain their Jewish and practice their faith – was not something everyone agreed about.

Some advocated taking up arms in violent resistance against the oppressors.

Some tried to be realists, and chose the path of accommodating and collaborating with the occupying forces to keep the peace and insure safety and other benefits for themselves and their community.

Some opted for a way of life defined by separation – focusing on study and prayer and holy living in order to preserve their identity as a people set apart by God, until such time as God would come to fulfil those old promises.

I think we can have a little recognition of those ways of responding, because they are not unlike some of the different answers people today make to those questions about how to be faithful in a difficult time.

Some Christians today take an antagonistic stance toward the world in general and especially everyone outside their own Christian circles. A few support actual violence; more just engage in a lot of arguing, criticism, and anger, and call it witnessing.

A lot of Christians today seem committed to blending in, not making waves, not speaking up, not offending anyone, not giving too much critical thought to where the values of faith and culture might diverge.

And others choose to separate themselves – their interests, their communities, their practice of faith – as much as possible from the society around them. It's about purity, identity, and protection from evil influences in a world they don't consider themselves a part of.

None of those paths are the journey Jesus calls his people to. The Sermon on the Mount (especially in chapter 7, which we'll get to in a few weeks) makes it pretty clear that Jesus doesn't support the way of violence, even toward enemies. And here, already, in these pithy sayings about salt and light, it's evident that neither separateness nor unobtrusive blending in are quite what Jesus has in mind either for those who follow him.

“You are the salt of the earth. ...You are the light of the world.” Jesus believes that God's people belong in the world, which is, after all, God's world. The blessedness which Jesus talked about at the beginning of the sermon is not for our own comfort or for creating a cozy little community but is to be passed on ...for the good of the world. (D. Hare)

These verses remind us of the tough questions we face as people of faith in a difficult time. “Who are we?” and “What are we here for?” sound simple. Answering them faithfully isn't easy. Maybe Jesus didn't intend it to be easy. Maybe that's why he gave us these poetic but challenging metaphors to wrestle with.

What does it mean to be “salt” in the world? What does it mean to be “light”?

“Salt” may have negative connotations to us because we know that for some people too much dietary salt can be a bad thing. But in proper amounts, it's necessary for our bodies to function as they should. And to Jesus and his audience, salt was an important and valued substance. It was a symbol of covenant. It was used to preserve food safely. And we understand from Jesus' words that salt was valued for its flavor. All cooks know this. Even if you're greatly limiting the amount of salt you use, flavor just is not the same with *no* salt. Interestingly though, the way salt works best is not when it's overpowering, but rather when you use just enough to bring out other flavors.

That suggests to me that our role as people of faith in the world is not, individually or corporately, to be right or to have all the answers or to fix everything or to tell everybody how to believe and behave. But it might be to give of ourselves to bring out what is good in others, to encourage a variety of gifts, to cooperate for the common good wherever and whenever we can, to be the voice of hope in troubled times.

What I'm sure it doesn't mean is that our main job is to be “nice.” We have had way too much mere niceness masquerading as Christianity. And it's kept us from addressing things that need to be addressed, like racism, and poverty, and violence against women. It's kept us from telling the truth about our depression and our addictions and our doubts. Sometimes, I regret to say, it's made the church kinda ... boring. It's kept us from having anything truly compelling or beautiful or challenging to offer the world. What good is that?

“Light” is a Biblical image more familiar to us, mostly used to refer to the light of God's wisdom and truth that comes to us in many ways, and especially in Jesus. But here Jesus is telling *us* that *we* are light.

(It's interesting, isn't it, that he doesn't say, "try hard to be salt and light"? He says, you are. It's not so much doing certain things, but *being*, living in a particular way. I heard the Indigo Girls last week sing their song with the line, "when the world is night, shine my life like a light." I think they capture exactly what Jesus is saying. And I think it is critical to understand this about the Sermon on the Mount: in spite of its bluntness at times about what is right and what is wrong, it's not, fundamentally, a list of do's and don't's. It's about who we *are*, about identity and purpose. It's about a way of being, grounded in the grace of the kingdom. I will have more to say about that next week.)

But..."light": "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid" reminds us that we are inevitably going to be witnesses –of some kind - to the faith we hold. It's sadly true that too many people see the church as a weird subculture- narrow-minded, exclusive, anti-science, hypocritical, angry. Another sizeable group considers the church useless and irrelevant, with nothing helpful to offer them in the face of their struggles. It may be that we just have not been willing enough to let God shine our lives and our communities as light. We have been glad to be inconspicuous because that's easier and less risky.

The purpose of light is to help people see. But the thing about that is that where this really matters is where there is darkness. If we are the light, we need to be willing to go where it's dark. Apologies to those who are fans of Norman Vincent Peale, but the power of positive thinking just doesn't get us there. We need to be, following Jesus' example, people who can acknowledge the darkness. Grief is real. Fear that we're going to lose our jobs or our health insurance is real. The pain in our families is real. Sin is real. Corruption and violence are real. The resentments and rage we harbor are real. It's often tempting to deny or minimize these sorts of things, and I know how hard it is not to rush in, right past the darkness, with reassurances and optimism. It's hard to just be with someone in the darkness.

It's hard to stay engaged with the world's darkness, too. There are so many needs, so much suffering. Dishonesty and greed are on display everywhere we turn, while empathy is mocked as weakness. People do horrific things to other people, especially vulnerable people. The hate that's out there in the world leaves sometimes leaves me speechless. Stories of injustice make us want to weep with rage. It seems impossible that we could make a dent in it all.

But Jesus wouldn't turn a blind eye; neither can we. Jesus' disciples have never been called to protect themselves (or their own) and never mind anyone else. Jesus never said we should be careful to avoid controversial issues, and he certainly was not about going along and blending in. "You are the light of the world" sends us into the darkness – sometimes simply to be present there.

"You are the salt of the earth," assures us that as the body of Christ in the world, we do in fact have gifts of healing and blessing to offer.

What might those words of Jesus mean for us, today? There are lots of possible answers to that question. I would just like to share a couple of my answers:

It seems to me that being salt and light in our world means asking tough questions – of ourselves, first of all, ... and of our church, of our families and friends, of our community, or our leaders. There is a lot to wonder about in our complicated world, but somehow we've gotten used to getting our "information" in sound bytes, tweets, and oversimplified or sensationalized rhetoric. Salt makes people thirsty. Can we stimulate a thirst for truth, for real understanding, for genuine empathy for

others? Can we be about asking “why?” and “why not?” and “what could be different?” and “how does that fit in with what Jesus teaches us?”?

Another thing that people who are salt and light in the world might do is have the courage to bring uncomfortable, hidden stories and truths into the open. I’ve become increasingly aware of late that in this country we – most of us, anyway – have been taught and have deeply internalized a number of narratives about social reality that are simply untrue: The cowboys were the good guys and the Indians were savages. Black men are dangerous. Girls aren’t good at math and science. People are poor because they are lazy. Our criminal justice system assures everyone a fair trial. Lynchings were terrible but isolated incidents of racial violence. Women who are assaulted are usually did something to put themselves at risk. Not one of those narratives stands up to a scrutiny of the historical facts.

In the past few months, I’ve had the opportunity to read about various things: about who is incarcerated in this country, about official and unofficial treatment of various minority and immigrant groups of immigrants over the years (not pretty), about violence against women which is so prevalent that if it were an infectious disease we’d call it an epidemic... to name just a few topics. And I’ve been convicted and convinced that there is history and there are stories we have not been told and have not wanted to hear. Those untold and unheard stories separate, silence, and hide our sisters and brothers from us. They keep us all in the dark; they let things fester; they block us from solutions that really get at the heart of our problems. Who is better equipped to bring hidden but important stories into the light than people who follow Jesus, who said in another sermon: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:32)

Above all, if we are “salt and light” people, it seems critically important that we “know, claim, and live” (K. Lewis) our identity as Christians:

“Know” ... because when we don’t understand our faith and our scripture we are ill-equipped to discern between true and false, between the good news of the gospel and the empty values of a consumer culture.

“Claim” ... because we are called and because the world needs to hear the voices of a grace-filled, empathetic, and joyful Christianity.

And “live” ... because knowledge without engagement and claims without action just perpetuate the evils we deplore.

Lest this call seem too great a responsibility, too scary, too difficult ... let me leave you with a couple of reminders:

It only takes a little salt, or a little light, to make a difference.

And ... we don’t go anywhere alone: we are part of a blessed and beloved community, and Jesus is our companion on this journey.

Amen.

Resources:

Edwin Van Driel, article in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, volume 1
Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, (Interpretation Commentary), 1993
Karoline Lewis, workingpreacher.com