

“TAKING IT INTO THE WORLD”

Matthew 5:13-16; Matthew 13: 31-34, 44-48

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I talked last week about our congregation’s core values - inspiring worship, compassionate service, mind & spirit, arts & music, and earth care - and about how they help us to make decisions, be purposeful and stay focused. Those shared values are one way we come together as a community with a particular identity and calling. So it seemed worthwhile to spend a little time reflecting about them as we begin a year in which our worship theme is “Life Together.”

But it occurs to me that there is yet more to say.

I really believe that those core values are gifts of grace to us, that God’s Spirit led us as we went through the process of articulating and exploring who we are and what is important to us and how we believe we are called to follow and serve Jesus. And I know that gifts which come from God are always meant for sharing. So I have to think that our core values are not just for the benefit of our congregation. We need to understand those core values not just shaping who we are and how we behave and what we do *inside* the walls of the church. They bring us together, but they also go out with us.

Jesus is so very clear about his intention that his people be in the world with their gifts. “You are the light of the world.” “You are the salt of the earth.” It is not a separatist, pietistic, or timid vision. And the clear assumption is that we do have something to offer.

One of my favorite gems of wisdom from our Presbyterian Book of Confessions is found in the Confession of 1967. It says, essentially, that the church is the church when it is gathered together for worship and fellowship. The church is also the church when its people go out into the world.

Let me quote a little: “The church disperses to serve God wherever its members are , at work or play, in private or in the life of society. Their prayer and Bible study are part of the church ’s worship and theological reflection. Their witness is the church ’s evangelism. Their daily action in the world is the church in mission to the world. ... Each member is the church in the world.”

(The Confession of 1967, *Book of Confessions*, PCUSA, 9.37-9.38)

When we walk out these doors, we don’t leave it all in here. We take the church with us. We take our values with us. Wherever we go, we are the church. You are the church.

You are still the church, even when you aren’t singing or praying in worship, or participating in a church activity, or reading the newsletter, or working on a church-related project, or talking with another church member. You are also the church when you’re walking the dog, buying groceries, volunteering at the food pantry, listening to the news, doing your work,

having lunch with friends, picking up litter, involving yourself in community issues, attending a concert, gardening, creating, arguing, travelling, exercising, listening.

We forget sometimes that we are still the church when we are dispersed “out there,” doing our own diverse things from week to week. We forget that there might be people “out there” whose only vision of what the church is like comes from us – and so sometimes we aren’t the best of ambassadors. We forget that there might be people longing to see that the church – and church people - can be compassionate, diverse, open-minded, and joyful. And we forget that even the most ordinary actions can be service, can be worship, can be infused with the presence of God.

I think that’s one of the reasons I love series of Jesus’ short-short parables in Matthew 13. Parables of the kingdom, they are called. What is the kingdom of God *like*? - that’s the question they are meant to answer. And what they do *not* say is that the kingdom of God is like a grand palace or temple, a mighty army, wealthy city, a vacation paradise, a majestic mountain, a utopia, or an alternative universe. Jesus’ metaphors are much simpler: a seed, yeast, a field with some unspecified treasure buried in it, a pearl, a fishing net. Even the treasure and the pearl – things with some significant value – are not wildly fanciful and exotic and huge. One field. One item of jewelry. And a tiny seed, the yeast that makes bread rise, a fisherman’s tool.

These things might not be the *same* everyday objects that are in our lives, but we recognize them as the stuff of ordinary life in the world. I wonder if we could write modern versions of these parables? “The kingdom of God is like the cup of coffee that wakes you to a new day. And then, the kingdom of God is like the internet that connects everything. The kingdom of God is like a businesswoman who invests all she has in a new company. The kingdom of God is like a sculptor who crafts art out of broken objects.” I don’t know whether any of those work. Maybe you can come up with something better; try it, just for fun.

But the point is: Jesus’ comparisons don’t just tell us something about the kingdom of God; they also lend beauty and value and holiness to everyday life in the world, and to the tasks and objects of that life. There is for Jesus – and in scripture – no dividing the world into “sacred” and “secular.” Worship flows into service. Sunday flows into Monday and the rest of the week. There is no being one person in church and another person out there in the world. There is only who we are, and how we live out who we are in Christ, wherever we are.

We find that hard, sometimes. Often it’s because it means taking a stand or defending someone vulnerable or identifying yourself as a person of faith in a context that is hostile or indifferent. To do any of those things takes some courage.

But sometimes it’s more basic than that: sometimes it’s just hard to figure out just what it might look like to be part of the church when we are out there in the world. And it occurred to me that our core values can help us think about what that could mean. Here are some of the things I thought of:

What does it mean, in between Sundays, that inspiring worship is a value that defines us? How does a commitment to inspiring worship go with us into the world? Maybe something you hear or think about during worship becomes a conversation during the week. Maybe we take a spirit of gratitude and awareness of God's presence into other times and places. (That makes me think of Jayme Ruimveld and the glorious sunrise photos she regularly shares on Facebook!) Maybe we create family or personal rituals. Maybe we make time for prayer each day, or make lists of gratitudes or light a candle on the dinner table to remind us that God's Spirit is with us.

And maybe we learn to say "no" to things that make us "too busy" to get to church on Sundays. I think that regular worship also helps us to keep our priorities straight; maybe it helps us know what we shouldn't be giving our time and energy to. I think, too, that real worship keeps us humble and curious and open, and sends us out into the world that way. It's good to hear about how others worship God; it's good to wonder about things; it's good to remember that each of us is just one small human in the universe; it's good even to be in touch with some of the suffering around us. Then we can come back to our Sunday worship service with new perspectives or with questions, with new things to give thanks for or a new appreciation of familiar rituals. A worshipful life between Sundays brings us back here more ready to really engage in worship together. Because although we often talk about what we or our children "get out of" worship, I am completely convinced that what we *bring* to it is at least as important as anything we hear or experience during this hour.

Compassionate service is like a robe we need to put on every day, again and again, until it becomes like our skin, a part of us. It is *hard* to bring that to whatever it is we do, day to day. Life is full of opportunities to judge, to turn away, to rush through interactions, to cut corners. But our lives are also full of people and situations in need of compassion. Some of them are strangers. Some of them are our loved ones. Compassionate service can be as simple as making a cup of tea for a spouse who has had a hard day or as big as a career you know you are called to. It is bringing a Christ-like presence to whatever you do. Compassionate service is, in so many ways, the opposite of our culture's notion of success. And yet it is incredibly powerful. Our ability to live this value is also absolutely critical to the integrity of the church's witness in the world.

In church we claim and we try to practice the unity of mind and spirit, valuing both head and heart knowledge, both science and spirituality, both faith and reason, both thinking and feeling. Doesn't our world desperately need that unity? Maybe we need to be among the people saying that religion and science are not opposed, that facts matter, that taking the Bible seriously isn't the same thing as taking it literally. Or maybe we need to be among those who take spiritual questions seriously, who can talk about mystery, who will promise to pray and really do so. Maybe it means we do all of those things.

I'm sure that it means we commit ourselves to continuing to learn – there is no time in life when any of us can honestly say that we know all there is to know about scripture or God or the Christian faith - and also to attending to our own spiritual needs. It means encouraging one another to do both of those things as well. I think it also means we continue to be, as Presbyterians have always been, vocal supporters of things like public education and libraries. And it means that as citizens we understand that GDP and economic growth are

not the real measure of a society's greatness; to paraphrase scripture, we can gain the whole world and lose our soul.

At church, we receive the arts and music as God's gifts, and have opportunities to experience the powerful ways they can communicate, inspire, heal, and bring people together. That might lead us to listen more attentively and look more carefully at the music and art we encounter everywhere. Maybe it means we support and encourage artists whenever we can, that we advocate for music and arts education, that we look for ways to connect with others through music and art. It might mean that we explore and share our own creative gifts – realizing that creativity is one of the ways we are "made in the image of" our Creator. Maybe it means sharing with friends about the ways the art or music at our church is meaningful to us... or even inviting a friend to come and enjoy it too.

Earth care is a timely expression of our faith and values in the world, especially since there are still many people who believe – wrongly – that the Bible provides validation for unrestrained use of the earth's resources and disregard for its non-human creatures. People of faith caring about the earth and practicing good stewardship are a witness to God's love for our planet. There are endless ways we can practice earth care; I don't have to give you a lot of examples as I know you are aware of them. But we can be more intentional about doing those things *as expressions of faith*.

We can also make known the things we do as an earth care congregation. We can encourage other churches in our community to move in this direction. We can give fair trade coffee as gifts and explain why our church participates in the equal exchange program. We can get involved in local environmental action or volunteer with conservation organizations – letting it be known that people of faith are called to this work.

Those are some of the things I thought of. I'm sure you can think of other ways our core values can help us be the church "out there" in the world as well as here together. I know that each of our lives offers unique and different opportunities and challenges to witness to God's presence and respond to Jesus' call. I'd love to hear what you come up with.

"You are the light of the world." "You are the salt of the earth." We sometimes treat them as kind-of-poetic inspirational-plaque sayings, but those words of Jesus are missional words, sending words. Salt and light are quiet things, everyday things... but they are also powerful, transformative, making-their-presence known kinds of things.

They are not to be underestimated!

Nor are we to underestimate the gifts we have to offer the world.
Go! Be salt. Be light. Be the church. Amen.