

Being Salty

Matthew 5:13-20

5th Sunday After Epiphany

Rev. Don Best

Bethel Presbyterian Church

West Union, IA

February 9, 2020

Gospel Reading

Last week we heard the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, from Matthew. We heard Jesus proclaim blessings on the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted. Rather than think we are those people, I talked about us, the Church, as the kingdom of God, being the blessings to them.

This week, we continue in chapter five, with verses 13 through 20. Jesus uses two familiar things as metaphors for discipleship: salt and light. If we continue to hear his teachings to help us know who we are, and what we are to do, what can these two images mean for us? Listen now to Matthew, chapter 5, verses 13 through 20:

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Jesus continues teaching the disciples, and we should hear this as teaching to us as the Church; members of Christ's body in the world. Jesus says: "You are the salt of the earth." Just like last week, Jesus is making a statement about how things are. "You are..." Not, "you should be..." or you must become..." but "you are..." "You are the salt of the earth." Jesus' disciples are the salt of the earth. His disciples are not salt unto or for themselves, but they are salt for the earth.

Another point to make, is that the "you" in "You are the salt..." is in the plural form. Jesus says, you all are the salt of the earth. Being salt is less an individual quality and more a statement about the community of disciples, the church. It is in community that we can affect the earth. In community who we are, and what we do, has impact on the earth; or at least it should.

Then Jesus says, "but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot." If salt has lost its taste, its saltiness, what good is it? It can no longer add flavor to food. It can no longer impact the dish to which it is added; it is no longer good for anything.

Most of us were raised, and lived our lives, in a predominately Christian society. Being Christian, meant being like everyone else. Christianity was the most common faith in the United States, and it still is, but non-Christian influences in the world and or society are having a bigger impact. I don't think that Christians are a minority, but we are certainly a lesser majority. This means that, more and more, our society is looking less and less Christian. The world around us is changing. The salty church, the church that stands out in this world is one that retains its flavor.

The Interpretation commentary on Matthew, says that, "any church that adapts itself so completely to the secular world around it that its distinctive call is forgotten has rendered itself useless." Such a church no longer exhibits the traits that allow it to impact the world. It is no longer living out its saltiness to the world.

The next thing that Jesus says is: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid." The second metaphor for Jesus' disciples, and the church, is light, the light of the world. In the New Testament, we are used to hearing that Jesus is light. In John chapter 8, Jesus says: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." The prologue to John's gospel says that Jesus is the light that, "shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

In the Old Testament, God is the light to Israel. God led Israel through the desert as a pillar of fire at night, and Psalm 119 says: “[God’s] word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” But what does it mean that Jesus says that we are the light to the world? It means that who we are and what we do shines out into the world, a beacon of light in the darkness of the world. Like the city on a hill; impossible to miss. But what sort of things allow the church to shine?

For the answer, we can look back to our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah chapter 58. Listen again to verses 6 through 8: “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them... Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...” And again, in verse 10: “if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness.”

In the time of Isaiah, the people of Israel were too focused on their own fasting, their sacrifices and rituals were inwardly focused on themselves. But, the prophet, speaking for God, tells them what the Lord requires. The kinds of things that the Lord requires of the people are to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Quoting from our reading from Micah last Sunday. When our actions become too inwardly focused; when we are too preoccupied with ourselves and our own petty problems, we are like a lamp placed under a bushel. None of the light is allowed to escape; the light cannot shine out into the world, and we are not the light of the world, that Jesus proclaims his disciples to be. But when we are the church we are called to be, we are the city set on a hill and our authentic life cannot be concealed from the world.

Who we are as Christians must, like salt flavors food, flavor how we live our lives. That distinctive saltiness in us should be evident to those we encounter in the world. And as the church of Jesus Christ, we must shine the light of justice, freedom, and generosity into the world for them to see and know that we serve God. Mission is as inherit to discipleship, as saltiness is essential to salt, and shining is to light. Salt must be salty, light must shine, and the church must do mission.

Finally, Jesus said, “...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” The Interpretation commentary says: “the church needs to remember constantly that it is in fact not the light itself but only the window through which the light is to be seen.”

God is the light, we merely reflect that light into the world. Everything we do, as the salt and light of the world is not for our glory, but for the glory of God. We flavor and shine so that God's glory can shine brighter.

As the church of Jesus Christ, as disciples of Jesus, we must always search our life and mission to evaluate if we are flavorful and bright; or have we lost our taste or hidden our light from the world.

Let us pray:

God you are a light unto our path. Shine your Holy Spirit into our church, and into our lives, that we may reflect your light out to the world. Guide us, your disciples, to be salt and light in everything we do, focusing our attention and mission on those who need your love and comfort; sharing your light and our resources to those in need. Build us up, Lord, that your glory may be seen in all the world.

AMEN.