

“Mission as a Gift; Mission as a Calling”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 4, 2018

3rd Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 122:1-9

Matthew 5:13-20

In Jesus’ day, salt was a valuable commodity. Its function was to preserve food and to give flavor. Because of its usefulness, salt was sometimes even used as currency. Salt rations given to early Roman soldiers were known as *salarium argentum*, a forerunner of the English word “salary.” When Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth,” he was offering high praise as it would have brought to mind more than a convenient flavor source. Salt was, to put it in proper perspective, a necessary element of life.¹

However, Jesus offers this warning, “But if salt has lost its taste” – most likely from having been diluted – “how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under-foot.”

In a similar way, light is an absolute essential. But, Jesus warns his disciples who are true lights not to obscure it, for a light to the world can only do its job if it is not hidden. The light of Christ, when turned only inward for the sake of oneself, leaves the world around it in darkness.

“You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.” With both of these images, Jesus uses the second person plural to describe a new identity for the community of faith. You – all of you together, all y’all – are salt and light. These are great and holy attributes of discipleship, and present realities. But Jesus does not stop there. With this blessing comes responsibility.

This congregation is filled with people who act as salt of the earth and light to the world. They add savor through their good works; they let their light shine. How absurd that the light we have been given by Christ would be concealed under the basket. How outrageous that a city on a hill could ever be hidden. It is not enough to know about God. As disciples we have to also be the activity of God in the world. We are called to live out, in the present, our identity as salt and light.²

There is a tremendous temptation to be something other than what Jesus has told us that we are. Not content to be salt, many people in our day want their life to be more spicy – preferring to be the curry of the earth, or the sweet basil or sriracha pepper; something more entertaining or exotic. Not wanting to illuminate the world, we often

¹ Tyler Boyer, “Flavor, Focus and Fullness”

² Karoline Lewis from *Dear Working Preacher*

settle for being a kind of narrow flashlight that lights only the next step in our own particular path through the darkness. It is far too big a task to light the world, after all, so we settle for hiding the light of Christ within and directing it only to our own ends.

But the Christian community has a unique mission and usefulness. If it does not fulfill this purpose, it is of no use. Like salt with no flavor or light kept hidden, we find ourselves diluted and diminished by rejecting what Jesus calls us to be.

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law,” Jesus says. “I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” *Katalu*, the word translated as “abolish” could also mean “destroy” or “dilute.” Jesus has no intention of treating the Law like salt that is stripped of its flavor by dilution and so destined to be trampled. On the contrary, his desire is that the expression of the Law becomes full and complete, with nothing lacking in it at all.

“For, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees,” Jesus goes on to say, “you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” This statement must have widened the disciples’ eyes when Jesus spoke it. After all, no one was better at law-keeping than the Pharisees. They were to the Law what Wolfgang Puck is to gourmet cooking; what LeBron James is to basketball; they were the best.³

The truth is, though, that Jesus didn’t seem to think much of the lifestyle or the attitudes of the religious leaders of his day. He regarded them as hypocrites: their piety was a sham; they were nitpickers who loved the rules at the expense of loving people.

After all, righteousness is about more than knowing all the rules and regulations surrounding the Law, like the Pharisees did. Jesus calls for a righteousness that goes beyond what these people were willing or able to do. Jesus calls his hearers to a living of the Law that is as valuable, but as earthy and everyday, as salt. He calls them to lives that will illumine the dark places of the world; not avoid them because they might be unclean or uncomfortable. This is a righteousness fulfilled in the living and sharing of God’s word and will. It is a righteousness that is flavored by God’s Spirit and focused in the redemption of the world that God loves.

The Sermon on the Mount is not a long list of entrance requirements for the kingdom of heaven. This is not a checklist such that once you put a mark in every moral box you get rewarded for having earned your way into God’s eternal home. Everything in Jesus’ sermon, from the Beatitudes that we looked at last week through the closing parable about the wise and foolish builder who put their houses on rock or sand, all of it is about God’s grace: the mission of the community of faith (all of you together, all y’all) to be salt and light is a gift of God’s grace.

³ Scott Hoezee, “All Righteousness, All the Time”

How else can we explain these two images? Jesus tells his disciples that they are salt and light – he doesn't say that they might become salt and light if they try really hard. This isn't a prediction or a promise that may or may not come true at some future moment. Jesus declares that the disciples – these clueless, confused wet-behind-the-ears fishermen who had only just been called to follow Jesus – they are salt and light. That was their status; something they had no more earned than they understood. But that was their new identity.

The entire Gospel of Matthew is about God upending the conventional expectations and ordinary ways of doing things in order to reveal a new way of understanding the world and God's purpose in it. As Jesus teaches and heals, as he travels and encounters all types of different people – those considered to be the righteous and sinners – we discover that God has more going on in more places and in more people than we could imagine.

In the eyes of the religious leaders, Jesus was a far cry from righteousness. He broke the Law, he failed to keep Sabbath regulations, and contaminated himself by spending time and breaking bread with the wrong kinds of people. Yet, here in Matthew 5, Jesus claims that he was actually keeping the Law, right down to the slightest pen stroke. By doing these things, in fact, he was achieving a righteousness that was blameless and pure.

Our calling as a community of faith is to be righteous people of salt and light; to – like Jesus – spend time with real people in the real world, listening and attending well, treating them as the people made in the image of God that they are. All of the rules and regulations we have been taught should not mean more to us than people do. Our customary way of doing things should not stand in the way of seeking out other people as being welcome in God's eyes.

This is our mission and calling: to be a community of salt and light to the world. Along the way, we may be surprised at who God brings into our lives; about who we are led to partner with. Sometimes, we might discover that the most righteous, the most moral thing to do is the very thing that will cause others to question our righteousness. It may be that, as a community which is not afraid to have different values than the culture around us, we might get criticized for our choices. They might not always seem safe or practical. But that's okay; it happened over and over for Jesus. And he fulfilled righteousness fully.

And so, as the body of Christ, as followers of Christ, as recipients of the gift of God's grace, let us come together at God's holy table to remember the righteous acts of Christ, who showed us his great love by giving of himself for our sake. May our light also so shine. Amen.