

“The Law Fulfilled”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 22, 2023

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Matthew 5:1-20

Introduction

Over the last two Sundays, we have heard Matthew’s description of Jesus first, being baptized by John and then, undergoing temptation in the wilderness. These two events are presented as times of blessing and preparation: making Jesus ready to undertake the ministry of teaching and healing that lies ahead.

After calling his first disciples – four fishermen that become “fishers of men” – Jesus sets about teaching the people and healing them of their diseases. These activities inspire a crowd of followers – people who will go with him up to this hillside where Jesus sits down and delivers the Sermon on the Mount. Imagine, if you can, the grass under foot, the smell of the air along the seaside, and the buzz in the crowd about who this man – with such wisdom and powers to heal – might be. Jesus begins with the Beatitudes and we continue with our second reading: verses 13 to 20; listen for the word of God.

Read Matthew 5:13-20

In *Tales of the Hasidim Later Masters*, Martin Buber offers this note of rabbinical wisdom:

Every person should have two pockets. In one pocket should be a piece of paper saying, “I am but dust and ashes.” When one is feeling too proud, reach into this pocket and take out this paper and read it. In the other pocket should be a piece of paper saying, “for my sake the world was created.” When one is feeling disheartened and lowly, reach into this pocket and take this paper out and read it. We are each the joining of two worlds. We are fashioned from clay, but our Spirit is the breath of God.

The Beatitudes – the first words that Jesus speaks in his Sermon on the Mount – bring attention to such contradictions: mourning and being comforted, persecution and rejoicing, hunger and thirsting for righteousness and being filled. Among these statements, Jesus says: “blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

This may well be a reference to the 37th Psalm, which reads: “The meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” (37:11) The Hebrew word for “meek,” also sometimes translated “humble,” is *avanah*. Literally, it means to occupy your God-given space in the world; not to take up so much space that it squeezes other people out, and not so little that our responsibilities fall to others.¹

Surely you know people who seem to take up all the oxygen in a room. When Jesus says, “blessed are the meek,” he is not saying that we ought to be shrinking violets, or that we should allow others to walk all over us, but, instead, that we should not overestimate ourselves or our abilities, while not underestimating them either.

We live in the world of likes and retweets; followers, fans, and favorites; and it’s easy to become tempted to determine our self-worth based on how many – or how few – of these we have. When we underestimate our worth or ourselves, that is not humility. Proper discernment, Jesus seems to be saying, allows us to deal with each other in the right way, with the honor that each deserves, not seizing from others what does not rightly belong to us, but inheriting our proper portion because – whether we are talking about land or energy or attention – there is enough in a beloved community for all to have their share.

Jesus calls his hearers to be salt of the earth and warns us not to lose our savor; otherwise, our lives spoil and become good for nothing. He calls us to be the light of the world; warning us not to hide the radiance of God but to allow it shine before others. The verbs here are indicative; that is, they indicate an existing condition; they don’t prescribe it.

Unlike so many other languages (including the Greek in which this text is written) English is impoverished for its lack of differentiation between the singular and plural second person “you.” Verses 13 to 16 are addressed to a plural audience (to “y’all”). That is, no one individual embodies salt or light; rather, the community is needed to exemplify that which most resembles the salt and light of which Jesus speaks.²

Salt and light were both precious commodities in Jesus’ time. Both sustain life. Neither can be produced easily on one’s own. They are gifts of creation that require careful ingenuity to access and conserve. And whether eating a pretzel or curing a ham, whether finding your way down a dark hallway or navigating a curvy, country road at night, they make all the difference.

¹ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

² Melanie Howard from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Living in a post-Edisonian world, we are almost never at the mercy of where the sun happens to be. We can create light with the flick of a switch. But for most of human history, this was not so. How foolish, then, would it be – for someone in the ancient world – to hide a light rather than putting it on a lampstand for all to see?

Sometimes, though, our lights are hidden by bushel baskets. Maybe that bushel is the self-absorption of internal conflicts. Maybe it is a lack of confidence or feeling of inferiority. Church communities get caught up thinking that they are not – or do not have – as much as they once did, hearkening back to the days when the pews and Sunday School classes were filled. They get distracted by who is allowed to come to the Table or what color the carpet should be.

Jesus reminds us that lamps do not magically end up underneath bushels. The only way for our light to be covered is if we choose to cover it. We are not inevitably doomed to self-absorption or lack of confidence or distraction. The light is only blocked when we put on the bushel basket.³

Why would the crowd of people – which included Jesus' first disciples – that followed Jesus to the hilltop to sit and listen to him speak care about such things? What difference would this talk about saltiness and shining light make for their lives?

When Jesus walked by lake and called Simon and Andrew, James and John to be his followers, he wasn't inviting some friends on a weekend fishing trip to drop everything. He wasn't calling successful small businessmen to give up a good – or even decent – livelihood.

In the first-century Roman empire, fishing was a miserable job. Fish, of course, were a valuable and important part of the economy; a necessary commodity that fed people throughout the empire. But there was no such thing as a free enterprise fishing business. Fishing was controlled by the Roman state – and profited only its elite.

For the fishermen, their work was not their own. The best fish would be shipped off to Rome to go on the tables of the wealthy. The emperor functionally owned the lake and all the creatures in it. The best of the catch belonged to him.

After Rome took its portion, the leftover fish might be sold at local market, but would be heavily taxed. In ancient Rome, you didn't work for yourself. You didn't choose among possibly prosperous careers. You worked for the empire and – after all

³ Amy Oden from *WorkingPreacher.com*

that was taken from you and sent back to the wealthiest people in the empire – you and your community received little benefit.⁴

Some people feel the same way today. In spite of how hard they work, rents are too high, or the right education is not available, or medical expenses are not covered. Like many of those people sitting on the hillside listening to Jesus 2000 years ago, they hunger and thirst for righteousness, they feel persecuted and poor in spirit, they are seeking to remain humble without getting trampled on: to take up the proper amount of oxygen and space; to remember that they are fashioned from clay but filled with the breath of God.

Jesus says that we must remain savory and shine brightly to make a difference for God in the world. Precious as they may be, neither salt nor light exits for themselves. They only fulfill their purpose when they are poured out, revealed for all to see. So, we are to let our light – our good works for the sake of righteousness – shine forth and be shared.

Jesus preaches to the people as a teacher who is steeped within the Jewish tradition and Hebrew faith. Jesus is not offering something that supersedes the Law – he is not seeking to denigrate and displace an “outdated” religious system – but views the Law with great respect.

This Law was given to a people who – in their Exodus wilderness – knew nothing but bondage in Egypt: they needed the Law to teach them how to be a people – God’s beloved sons and daughters – who would one day inherit a land (and a life) they hardly knew how to imagine. On that hillside, Jesus reminds the people that they are still God’s beloved people – blessed are they even among their present trials and troubles. But, in order for the abundant love of God to be made known among them, they needed to let their light – which seemed to be hidden under all kinds of bushel baskets – shine forth.

Y’all are the salt of the earth, Jesus says to them – a fitting phrase that is still used to describe the honest, hard-working, generous, and humble people that we so admire – *don’t lose your savor*. Instead, he encourages them to let their righteousness – their good works – be what defines who they are. Listening matters; but doing matters more. Amen.

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, “Sunday Musings: Angling for Justice” from *The Cottage*