

Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-20

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 underfoot.

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."

For context, our scripture follows Jesus' call of his first disciples. He begins the process of teaching them what is about to take place and he uses two metaphors to describe and prescribe who his followers are and what they do for and in the world. The first metaphor, "You are the salt of the earth" (v. 13), suggests that Jesus gives them as his disciples a distinctive capacity to elicit goodness on the earth. To say that we are to be the salt of the earth implies that we are to bring some "flavor" to our relationships with each other. Salt has an edge as well as a satisfying taste. It makes come alive what would otherwise seem tasteless and bland. In certain circumstances, salt can be used as a preservative, keeping food fresh for an extended period of time. Salt is also used to stimulate thirst. Like salt, which is used to alter or enhance the tastes of food, the disciples' capacity to elicit goodness as they participate on the

earth should be of profound consequence. The danger for disciples is that they may lose that capacity by forgetting that they are to disorder the status quo by valuing those who are dispossessed, caring for those who suffer loss, seeking to do justice, showing mercy, having integrity, being peacemakers, and courageously standing for what they believe.

As salt in the world Jesus could model both be affirming of the individual person and challenge the person's behavior. Remember Jesus accepted the rich young man, but challenged him to give away his possessions. He accepted the woman caught in adultery, and then instructed her to sin no more. Jesus upheld a person's dignity, regardless of circumstance, while he also challenged them, inviting behavioral change for the better. The challenge for change is the saltiness that keeps the moment alive in order to grow, spiritually and personally. The saltiness of the challenge for change, over time, becomes the preservative that keeps one alive. Challenge leads to change that leads to perseverance. Disciples who do not engage in such practices that humanize life on earth will be like salt that has lost its taste.

The second metaphor, "You are the light of the world," invites us to consider the role of disciples as a gathered community (vv. 14-16). Light enables us to see things and is a kind of energy that gives things color, helps vegetation to grow, provides solar power for electricity, and can be focused for specific uses, such as a laser. Like light, the disciples as a gathered community have the overarching purpose of being the mirror

that refracts God's light so that all peoples and nations can know of God's justice and mercy. As a gathered community the disciples are like light when they engage others in the world, enabling diversity (giving things color), nurturing a healthy, ecofriendly world (helping vegetation to grow), generating policies for ecojustice (providing solar power), and restoring or repairing whatever relationships that need such (focusing for specific purposes). These are the good works that will glorify God.

Jesus tells his followers that they are the light of the world and that this light should not be hidden but seen. We often interpret this to mean that we are not to hide our gifts and talents by placing them under the metaphorical bucket. One of the favored offertory sentences in the *Book of Common Prayer* is "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

There is another reason for light to shine. There is darkness in life—external and internal.

Jesus encourages his followers to bring light to a dark and broken world. The light is the light of the gospel, and it draws all people to its warmth and radiance. This mission has been primary, from the very beginning, throughout every age. Archbishop William Temple is often quoted as saying, "The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members." In order for the light to be seen, we must be willing to go where the darkness exists, to engage and walk through it, so that, in time, the light can overcome it. Annie Dillard

writes, "You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary." We must go into those dark places, bearing the light of Christ. The light is not given for our own personal enjoyment.

As the end of our scripture remind us, it is because of who Jesus is and how he understands his mission that his disciples individually and collectively are enabled to be salt and light. As Jesus declares to his newly commissioned disciples and followers that he has not come to abolish the law or the prophets, he claims his place in God's history of the liberation of and covenant with God's chosen people. By so doing, Jesus extends the mission of God's chosen people, but he does so without dismissing the tradition or breaking the covenant, thus fulfilling rather than abolishing the law and the prophets. In an important sense, Jesus himself is the key for interpreting the law and prophets in line with God's will for the present time and until the end of time. Thus Jesus admonishes his followers that breaking the commandments oneself or leading others to do so is an offense against divine eternal purposes.

Jesus enjoins his followers in these words: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (cf. vv. 6, 10). With Jesus' proclamation that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets, righteousness here refers to the way that Jesus interprets the law and lives by it. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was concerned

with observance of tradition, public displays of piety, and adherence to the letter of the law. The righteousness of Jesus flows from his relationship with God and, in turn, is the ground of Jesus' relationship with his followers.

As Jesus' followers we are both commanded and enabled by Jesus to surpass conventional and institutional practices of righteousness. Exceeding conventional righteousness means that Jesus' followers seek to live justly as an expression of our worship of God (cf. v. 14; v.10); we have been blessed and are passionate about being participants in God's vision for the world (cf. vv. 3-9). If Jesus' followers lack this passion for justice and living into God's reordering of human life, then we, in effect, break the covenantal relationship that originates with God and is extended to humanity through Jesus. When the covenantal relationship is broken, our future life with God is no longer possible—"you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 20b).

We can understand our discipleship through what Jesus taught those whom he extended his specific call (his disciples) and to those who because of what they saw and heard of Jesus are persuaded to follow him (the crowds). God's blessings and God's favor are the beginning of the call to be a follower of Jesus. God's blessings are the root of our right relationship with God and other humans. The righteousness of God fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus makes possible human righteousness.

So, I had a busy week which reminds me of our scripture and its meaning in our lives. I met briefly with my supervisor who told me that the president of Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit, was going to be absent from the agency for the entire month of February because of his treatment for throat cancer. Although he is half-way through his treatments he is finding it more and more difficult to cope with the challenges of his job and travel back and forth to Ypsilanti where he lives and receives therapy. A day later my supervisor called me to ask if I could do her and the executive team the favor of praying for Dan before he left. We gathered as people of faith, holding hands and praying for his healing and that he knew that he left the agency briefly in the hands of his capable staff! My supervisor Felicia used her influence to be salt and light at Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit.

One of the former executive team members died last Sunday and I attended his funeral Mass on yesterday at St. Cyprian Catholic Church in Riverview. The priest reminded the gathered family and community that Joseph, my former colleague, not only worked for Goodwill, but that he had been Goodwill in his family, his job, his community. He commissioned each person present to follow the example of Jesus and Joseph Hatzl to be salt and light in every situation we encountered.

I was excited that the Los Angeles Lakers paid tribute to Kobe Bryant as people of faith on Friday night. One reporter said it was like a religious service. Songs of faith were sung. Remembrances and tributes

were spoken...I think for many this may be as close to worship as they will get. But hopefully it reminds us all of the brevity of life and that they need to make some decisions about how they will live the rest of their lives. None of us is perfect, but Jesus offers each of us guidance and forgive, and then invites us to be salt and light in the world.

Unfortunate, I heard of a situation where someone did not use their voice for salt and light. Linda's granddaughter attended the March for Life in Washington, DC. One protester shouted to Maddie that she should have been aborted. I understand the protester disagreed, but how did their statement bring salt or light into the world? I think we have to find more appropriate ways to disagree than shout hate!

Human righteousness is about being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. As the salt of the earth, we are disciples of Jesus when we allow our characters to be formed by God's blessings. As the light of the world, we are followers of Jesus when we accept the covenantal blessings as a call into relationships with despised groups because of what we believe—even if it means that we may be persecuted. As disciples of the Jesus who came not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets, we seek to live righteously in ways consistent with the new interpretation of the law that Jesus provides. When we are salt and light for others, we are more likely to fulfill the law as Jesus suggested: To love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, and soul; and our neighbor as ourselves. **Marcia Y. Riggs and Charles James Cook**

2/2/20

MATT 5:13-20

Salt and Light

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A,
Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.