

“Salt and Light”
Matthew 5:13-20
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Fy and Darwin couldn't have picked a better week to reaffirm their baptisms, and to help the rest of us reaffirm our own. They couldn't have picked a better week, because of the Gospel lesson which is assigned to this week. You see, this is the first of several weeks we'll spend together in the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew, and the Sermon is the perfect material for baptism, because in the early church, they had a sort of general rule about the appropriateness of candidates for baptism, namely whether they knew the creed, the Apostle's Creed we will say together during the liturgy, and whether there was a reasonable expectation that they could live out the Sermon on the Mount. To affirm the Creed, to live the Sermon. If that seems like a lot, if that seems like a high expectation, if it seems like a high bar, don't worry; they had at least a year to work on their understanding of who God is, and how they should live as a result. Those about to be baptized were called catechumens, and the period of instruction before they could be baptized was a lengthy and rigorous one. They needed to be able to recite the Apostle's Creed, not nearly as easy as you might think since nearly all of them were illiterate and could not memorize it as we do by reading it again and again. And they needed to be able to prove they could be the salt and the light that Jesus tells us about in our own passage tonight from Matthew.

The Sermon on the Mount is, of course, filled with Jesus' words on how to live ethically, responsibly, and fruitfully the faith we espouse in the Apostle's Creed. There is, of course, an implicit theology in the Sermon, but you have to extract it from all the explicit directions on how to conduct your life as a follower of Jesus Christ, Jesus' wisdom on adultery, on divorce, of making oaths, on retaliating, on loving your enemies, on generosity, to name just a few of his themes. In tonight's passage, which is the first part of the Sermon following the famous Beatitudes, Jesus previews the rest of the sermon; he sets up those who are listening to him by praising them, followed by an exhortation to live into that praise: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." High praise indeed, for people who had probably never considered themselves as such, neither praiseworthy, nor as valuable as salt and light. We have to remember what comes just before these words, those famous beatitudes, and to remember what Jesus is telling them through those beautiful words: Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are those who are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers. Blessed are you, Jesus says, blessed and not cursed.

Some of your Bibles may be translating the beatitudes as "Happy," as in "Happy are the poor in spirit," but to use happy is to miss the fundamental point Jesus is making about those to whom he is preaching. Jesus is not talking to the scholars and rabbis, the healthy, wealthy and educated. He is talking to the

disciples, to the rabble of hopeless, desperate people who needed someone who cared, who needed words of inspiration and compassion, who needed a reminder of who God is. These are people who had come to believe the prevailing religious wisdom that if you were poor, if you were sick, if you were suffering, it was because you had done something wrong, had committed some sin, and that as a result of your uncleanness, you were not blessed by God, but rather, cursed. And so now, on that mountaintop, he is giving words to the blessing he had already been sharing by those who had sought him for healing from their diseases, their paralyses, their demon possessions, their epilepsies. All of these he healed, all of these with their outward expressions of suffering, and now he turns inward to their human hurts and hopes, and he reminds these too, that they are blessed, not cursed.

To be blessed means to have some value in the kingdom, some value in God's eyes, and so Jesus moves on from reminding them of their value to showing them just how valuable they are. "You are the salt of the earth," he tells them, and that would give them a clue of their value. You see, biologically speaking, after water, perhaps the next most important element for human survival is salt. In fact, those of you who do a lot of exercise know that it is best not to drink too much pure water to refresh yourself, but rather to drink something like Gatorade, which contains essential electrolytes the body needs that can be diluted by drinking only water. Salt was necessary for preservation of foods in the absence of refrigeration. It was so important in daily life that it gave rise to our word "salary" which comes

from the latin, *salarium*, which was a Roman soldier's pay to be used for the purchase of salt. You couldn't have soldiers underperforming on the battlefield for the lack of salt. "You are the salt of the earth," Jesus is telling them. You are something absolutely essential for the survival of the human race. People need you, people will seek you out, people will treasure you for the blessing, like salt, that you are.

Likewise essential for human life and community is light. Who can work in the dark? Who can care for others in the dark? Who can create art and music and beauty in the dark? "You are the light of the world," Jesus tells them. You make possible everything humans need to do to not only survive, but to thrive, to experience the shalom of God, the peace and wholeness God has in mind for the whole creation. Cursed beings do not produce light. They hide in the shadows, they hide from the light. But blessed are you by God, made to shine like the sun, the very light of the world, and people will seek you out to live.

I've conveniently left out for a moment half of what Jesus said about each of these metaphors for the life of the discipleship, to focus on this aspect of blessing. But Jesus also reminds them that as a result of this blessing they have a responsibility to continue to be what they have been made to be. They have not changed themselves into the essential elements of salt and light; only God has done that through Jesus Christ. They may not have been made those things, but they are called to remain those things, to share their blessing with the world. And so the

reminder to keep pure your saltiness, to let it remain uncontaminated by elements which will reduce its saltiness and render it worthless. Salt does not lose its flavor through chemical degradation, but by being mixed with that which is not salt. And so the reminder to put that light on a lampstand, rather than under a basket. A light placed under a basket will go out for the lack of oxygen. A blessing revealed cannot be a blessing to others if it is not cared for and nurtured as the gift of God it truly is.

Jesus follows up this reminder of blessing and responsibility by giving them a reminder of the source of their strength for the task, namely God's word. "I have not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them... And I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." This is a high standard indeed, is it not? But they are not left without the means to do it: faith in Jesus Christ, his teachings in that Sermon on the Mount, and the church he would leave behind, a church that makes it its business to nurture those to whom God reveals that they are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world, people like you and me, and people like Fy and Darwin, who have come here tonight wanting to affirm in public that they accept both God's blessing and God's responsibility. Part of our ongoing efforts to maintain our saltiness, and to keep our light shining where it can be seen is the remembrance of our baptisms, and the covenant of grace God has made with each one of us through Jesus Christ, who was himself baptized into death, and raised to

new life, that we might follow him in death to sin, to be raised to life eternal and abundant. Tonight as Fy and Darwin profess their faith, and remember their baptisms, I invite you to do the same, and remember that you too are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world, essential elements of God's shalom, beloved and blessed by God. Amen.