

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
February 6, 2022
Matthew 5:13–20

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

Open our eyes, Lord, that we may see you in new ways. Open our ears Lord, that we may hear you in new ways. Open our hearts, Lord, that we may experience your love in new ways. Open our arms Lord, that we may serve you in new ways. Open us, lord, to the possibilities and the path of following you more faithfully. In Jesus name, Amen.

We continue this week looking at Jesus' sermon on the mount. Last week, at the beginning of the sermon, Jesus, as he frequently does, turns expectations upside down, declaring the blessedness of people who would not be considered blessed by many. The poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the peacemakers. And yet, it is exactly these people who Jesus says are blessed. He follows the declaration of blessings with a charge, and a reminder of what it is to follow in the ways of God. From Matthew 5, verses 13–20, listen for a word from God.

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.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 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. 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.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 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. 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

So often, particularly in the Gospel of Matthew, when we hear Jesus say anything about the scribes and Pharisees, we think he is saying something negative. There is a long history of interpreting, or I would say misinterpreting, Jesus' words about the Pharisees that has led to scapegoating and antisemitism. Jesus is not issuing an invective against Jews, Jesus himself was a Jew, and it is important to understand who the Pharisees are.

The Pharisees are the religious leaders, and experts in the law. Jesus would be considered a Pharisee himself. Pharisees are not bad Jews, or some lesser religion. They are the most committed and studied people of faith. Jesus, then, saying a person must seek to have their righteousness to be more than that of the scribes or Pharisees, means that Jesus is setting a high bar, an exceptional standard for what a life of faith might look like. Jesus makes clear that he is not abolishing the law, or replacing the law with something else. Rather, I believe he is, like prophets beforehand, reminding the people that we are called in our faith to stand in the rivers of transformative justice. Jesus' sermon on the mount does not replace the law and prophets, but echoes what it is they say. Jesus is saying, I believe, that our words must meet our deeds. Our knowledge of faith must also be demonstrated in the actions of our faith.

It is not enough to know about God and what God desires, but we also have to be about God's activity in the world. He is talking about the call and responsibilities of discipleship.

Knowledge without action allows injustice to continue. Knowledge without action is complacent. Knowledge without action is an empty faith. Knowledge about God simply for the knowledge of God does not lead to change, does not embody love of neighbor. Jesus' teaching isn't just about who we are, blessed and beloved, but also about how we are and what we are to be about, as I said last week, blessed *in order* to be a blessing. Because of whom we are, we are invited to live a life for the sake of others and to make a difference in the world.

Both salt and light can only fulfill their purpose when they are used, when they are poured out or not hidden. Salt and light do not exist for themselves. Salt and light, in Jesus' time and in our time, sustain and enhance life.

Salt is used for preservation and for seasoning. Salt brings out the other flavors in a dish, it makes things tasty. If salt loses its ability to do what it is meant to do, it is not useful. Similarly, light illumines and allows us to see. It is difficult to imagine in our own times just how important light becomes. We can simply turn on a light at any time and go about our business, but in Jesus' time it was not as simple. To think about hiding a light so that one cannot benefit from the illumination well, what good is it?

In the same manner as salt and light, the church, the community of faith does not exist for itself. We are a community created for the purpose of loving others. If we are not tasty and lit, what good are we? If we cannot demonstrate how we, as followers of Jesus, impact the world for good and exhibit love of neighbor, where is our usefulness? If we have knowledge, but do not put it into action, how are we exhibiting the

righteousness of God? The type of spiritual practice that is important to God is that practice which meets the needs of others. The call for justice in the world is not some abstract appeal or some undefined principal. As one commentator suggests, “this is a call to practice on a daily basis, in the nitty-gritty of life, the kind of justice that meets the most basic human needs of the powerless and oppressed and hurting in the world.”ⁱ

As I said before, Jesus sets the bar high. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is no small ask. Jesus expresses, “an expectation for a certain excellence in faith, a requested resilience in belief, a mandate for decidedly determined disciples that very well might trouble the faint of heart.”ⁱⁱ And that expectation, that resilience, and determined discipleship can, as one writer says, move us away from our “default setting which leans us toward comfort, conformity, and complacency when what Jesus really needs from us is to be the salt and the light.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Oak Grove has moved toward some of that work to lean away from comfort and complacency, particularly as we seek to be an anti-racist congregation and we take actions to work toward restoration, equity, and justice for Black and Indigenous persons. We have begun to act based on an honest acknowledgement of the past, of our understanding of how that past impacts the present and future, and of the call to God’s righteousness. Last year after a period of discernment, Oak Grove surrendered some of our accumulated wealth of the congregation’s assets as a beginning, to acknowledge and repair damage from the past as one step to build meaningful relationships with Afro-American, Indigenous, and people of color who have been harmed by structural racism. The transfer of this wealth, \$267,000 (about 16% of Oak Grove’s wealth) will be completed this year and will be transferred to four trusts housed with the Restorative Actions initiative.^{iv} The trusts, two entrusted to benefit Indigenous people and communities, and the other two entrusted to benefit Afro-American communities will be

directed by trustees comprised of individuals from these communities. (You can find more detail about the Restorative Actions initiative at restorativeactions.org).

Surrendering this wealth is to recognize systemic imbalances and the benefits Oak Grove has received because of these imbalances. It is not a gift given out of our charitable hearts because we recognize the wealth we have accumulated only occurred because we received some of that which never should have been ours in the first place. Oak Grove has benefited unfairly and accumulated ill-gotten wealth and income because of an unjust system. Surrendering a portion of our accumulated wealth is a first step in restoration, repair, relationship, and justice, and is a public witness to God's righteousness.

Jesus tells us that we are salt and light, so that others may see God. After Jesus warns us not to hide our light under a bushel so that people may see it, like a shining city on a hill, he says, "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." But notice that in this metaphor about being a light that the light does not belong to us, rather it is about the glory of God's call and grace. This, ultimately, isn't about us. As one writer puts it, "Our good works' are not ours in that they do not belong to us for we are not the source of such good works; we are only the conduits of God's righteousness, symbols pointing to a greater reality, signposts lighting the way to God's righteousness, not our own. Yes, we may serve as 'the light of the world,' but the conduit of glory for such light is not us or our achievements. That glory belongs" to God.^v

We do this work, like surrendering ill-gotten wealth, not because we want to be known as someone who does good, we do this work to point people toward and to be a witness to God's justice. Our hope and faith are not just about some eternal future, it's not about doing good in order

to punch our tickets to heaven. Our good works grow from our understanding of gratitude and grace and the invitation to join God in the here and now to participate in and witness to God's kingdom here and now; to be co-workers with God in restoration, peace, and justice.

Now, some of this may seem daunting. I know that for some, we hear a passage like this, we hear Jesus' words and maybe it feels like one more command that we will never fulfill. It feels like an admonition that we aren't doing enough. We hear Jesus setting a high bar for righteousness and we feel as if we have failed even before we have tried. We get down on ourselves and following our faith becomes more of a burden than an expression of joy. We believe we can never be enough, do enough, give enough, we just simply aren't enough.

Except. Except, Jesus' words here are a promise and not a command. Jesus doesn't say, "you will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, if..." Jesus isn't challenging the disciples to try harder in order to win God's favor. He doesn't start these words with, "you could be the salt of the earth, if" or, "you might be the light of the world, if..." No, what Jesus offers is a promise and not a prompt for something more. There are no qualifications in his words. There is no "if." His promises are not qualified by anything. Jesus declares, "You ARE the salt of the earth," "You ARE the light of the world." These are statements. They are declarations of the way things are, not as they might be or could be.

This is a continuation of the beatitudes from last week, a continuation of the blessing and promise from Jesus. Before telling us that we are salt and light, Jesus calls blessed all the kinds of people that culture and society don't consider blessed. Jesus is telling us that who we are, now, as we are, is enough. We are salt and light for the world, for the purpose of good that points to the glory of God. We have everything we need to be salt and light, and the world can use a healthy dose of salt and light.

Jesus is reminding us, again, that we are blessed in order to be a blessing to others. It is about our very identity. When we understand who we are, and whose we are, when we can truly believe that we are the conduits and creations to demonstrate God's kingdom, God's justice, God's mercy, God's grace, and God's love, when we can rest in our very being as beloved children of God, well, then we are released to do good in the world. We can be even more tasty and even more lit up, we can shine all the brighter.

I know it may seem like a contradiction, this high bar of expectation of discipleship alongside the reminder that we are enough. I wonder, as you look back on the interactions you have had with others over the last several weeks, I wonder how you have been salt and light. How in your school, workplaces, in your friendships and primary relationships, in your home, in the places you have volunteered and with the people you have interacted with, how have you been salt and light?

And before you dismiss the possibility of your saltiness, before you diminish your ability to radiate light, let me remind you of a statement I read from another pastor, that we should not forget, "small is what God most often uses to change the world."^{vi} Small is what God most often uses to change the world.

What were the words of encouragement said, the shoulder to cry on, the errand completed, the walk shoveled, the faithful and consistent work, the prayer offered, the protest joined, the letter written, the book read to learn more? Not everything that points to God must be grand. Not everything has to be calculated in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. How many small gestures, how many quiet moments of honest reflection, how many vulnerable conversations, how many small moments led to the bigger thing? Small is what God most often uses to change the world.

All that God asks of us is to be our deepest selves, to know who we are, and to live from a place of that knowledge in service to others. To live from a place of love and not fear. Marianne Williamson writes, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God... And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”^{vii}

The world needs salt and light, and God has provided it through us, as we are. God has blessed and gifted us so that we might be a blessing for others. Friends, you ARE the salt of the earth, and you ARE the light of the world. You are God’s beloved and blessed. You are meant to be tasty and to shine! You are...

You are.

Amen.

ⁱ Dennis Bratcher, <http://www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearA/Aepiphany5ot.html>

ⁱⁱ Karoline Lewis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-513-20-2>

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} More information can be found at www.restorativeactions.org

^v Eric Barreto, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-513-20-4>

^{vi} David Lose, <https://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-5-a-promises-not-commands/>

^{vii} Marianne Williamson, Marianne Williamson, [A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles"](#)