

Matthew 5: 13-16

SALT AND LIGHT

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¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify God in heaven.

This will be another sermon that is mostly a teaching one. Quite a few of you have asked for more of that, and I'm delighted to do them. As you know, I have a passion for the scriptures, and the study of them. Sometimes they are confusing, sometimes contradictory, sometimes puzzling and always a blessing.

So...before getting to the text for today, I'll give a bit of background on Matthew itself as a book, and the Sermon on the Mount in particular, because today's reading comes from that collection.

But first, let's hear the text again:

READ 13-16

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PRAYER: GOD, LET THIS TIME WE SPEND TOGETHER RIGHT NOW BE FOR US BOTH SALT AND LIGHT, THAT WE MAY BECOME SALT AND LIGHT FOR THE WORLD YOU LOVE SO MUCH. AMEN.

You've heard me say this part before, and quite recently. So forgive me if it seems repetitious. I find that frequent revisiting of these concepts is helpful though: so here we go:

So, some background:

After the resurrection, for the first several years, there was very little writing going on. They were convinced that Jesus was coming back, as he said he would, very soon. VERY soon. It never crossed their minds that there would be a second generation of them and that they would have to pass on the knowledge of Jesus to people who had never met him.

As the years passed by, and Jesus did not return, (or at least in the way they thought he would) the people who had known him in the flesh; who had heard him teach and had seen him heal....those people began to die off and they thought - "we'd better write this stuff down"

You can see the early church working out; wrestling with the fact that Jesus hadn't returned in the way they had seen him go.....note all the parables that go something like this: "There was a master who went away for a trip, and left his servants in charge....he was gone for a loooooong time" There is no mystery about what's going on there, is there? A second issue with respect to that emerged: There grew up the question, or the fervent belief (depending on where you were) that Jesus WAS with them; that he HAD returned, just not in the way they had expected, but rather in the people around them particularly the ones who were poor and needy. Stories about the Risen one not being recognized even by those who knew him best.....stories that end up saying "when you offer even a cup of water to someone who is thirsty you offer it to me" or "Lord when did we see you naked and clothe you, hungry and feed you" and Jesus replies "I tell you whenever you did it to the least of these you did it to me".

That discussion continues in the church today: some churches emphasize that Jesus will return and the time is getting close and we'd better get ready and live right...while others say he's always been here, he HAS come to us, in the ones who need us most, and so we'd better get ready and live right.

So they began to write things down. At first there were little collections of his teachings; things that were easy to memorize; things that were the basics for teaching to new converts: the beatitudes, the lord's prayer and so on... (and that was another issue – new converts, more and more daily in those days we understand. What was essential for them to know?) Small collections of teachings were gathered. One of these is called Q....

and then these were used to write more complete accounts....there were lots of gospels written. Of all of them, we have four: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Of these four, Mark was written first. About the year 60 or 65 – so 30 or 35 years after the crucifixion and resurrection. About 10 years after Mark was written, Matthew and Luke wrote theirs. They wrote them with a copy of Mark in front of them; if you read them side by side, you can see them copying Mark, then adding, adjusting, correcting his grammar....it's a fascinating study. Those three, Matthew Mark and Luke together are called "the synoptic gospels" because of the way they were written – they are closely tied to each other. The "syn" part of the word means "together" as in synchronize and so on.

Finally about ten years later, the gospel of John was written. As far as we know, independent of the other three. If you read them, you can get to know the styles and characteristics of each one. They tell the story of Jesus in their own words and for their own communities....the lines of the text like lines on a face; telling the story of the life experience of a body. Like a kaleidoscope, where the little jewels or nuggets are all the same, but Mark turns it one way and there's a lovely picture. Matthew comes along, turns it another way, and those same jewels form a completely different picture.

This year we'll be concentrating mostly on Matthew, getting to know him as an author, hearing things from his point of view. He begins with a family tree of Jesus. Starts with Abraham and Sarah (not Adam and Eve, which in itself makes you go "Hmmm!") ...he goes through a bunch of begats, which COULD make your eyes roll like a teenager forced to look at the family album....if it weren't for the fact that he includes a foreigner, a prostitute and Bathsheba (rape victim or seductress depending on your point of view). Right away you say "OK! This is going to be good!"

He moves to a stark account of Jesus' birth..... Mark had not included that at all. Matthew tells it plain and bare: no shepherds, no trip to Bethlehem, no angel visiting Mary, but he DOES take us to the foreigner place again, with the visit of the magi.

So you say to yourself: whatever he's trying to tell us about Jesus, it has something to do with foreigners. Was this a huge issue in his own community, that he stresses it in a way the others have not? So many questions.

Chapter three, we meet John the Baptizer. Jesus is baptized...is immediately tempted in the wilderness, and begins to teach and preach only when he hears that JB has been arrested. He appears on the scene, and his message, Matthew says, is: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

We're in chapter 4 now: he calls four of the disciples: Simon, Andrew, James and John. Then, the crowds begin to follow.

NOW comes the Sermon on the Mount, from which our text today comes. It appears that as an author, Matthew has gathered the teachings of Jesus from some of those collections we talked about earlier. Q in particular. Gathers them into three chapters (chapters 5, 6 and 7) and shows Jesus up on a mountain. Like Moses before him. Matthew will stress this again and again in his gospel: the similarity between Jesus and Moses. Our first clue was when an angry tyrant had all the baby boys killed – remember? So Jesus goes up the mountain to give this sermon. Luke, on the other hand, when he tells it, has Jesus on a flat place and calls it the sermon on the plain.

He begins with the beatitudes. We read those last week but let's read them again now. I'll start, you finish.

(DO IT) Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him,² and He began to teach them, saying:

³*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

*⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.

¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Right after that – and just before a series of pretty tough teachings about anger, oaths, adultery, divorce, and loving our enemies,just before that, these few verses. Two images.

Read text

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I'm going to make brief comments on each of those images separately, and then a more general observation.

First, salt: salt is a very earth-bound, body kind of image: the stuff of our lives: sweat, tears....we are, as body beings, salty by nature.

You may know that throughout history, salt has been considered extremely valuable as a commodity – so much so that Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt and hence the word “salary”. Salt is used to preserve, and to heal. It's a powerful image to use. Jesus says you are the salt of the earth. What does that mean to you?

When Jesus says you are the light of the world – that's interesting isn't it? Every week we begin our services by saying “Jesus is the light of the world” and here – he's saying the same to us.

That reminds me of Moses at the burning bush. Do you remember? God is saying “I've heard the suffering of my people” and Moses says “Yes!” and God says “something's got to be done about this” and Moses says “Yes!!!” and God says “Somebody ought to go to Pharaoh and say let my people go” and Moses says “YES!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” and God says – “um....that would be YOU.”

(that was my paraphrase but you get the idea) Here, we've been going through Epiphany, celebrating the Light of God and Jesus says “yes and now that's YOU.”

We could go on and on with both of those images....they're very rich. But just one more thought for today.

It's about how each of those images functions. I'll see if I can say this in a way that makes sense. They both function to honour the integrity of whatever they touch. Does that make sense? Let me try again:

Salt is used – sparingly, on food – say a tomato. You put salt on a tomato not so you will taste the salt, but so that the flavour of the tomato itself is enhanced. To bring out what is already there. We shine light onto something not for the light's own sake, but so that the object can be seen.

That might sound obvious ,but....throughout church history, there's been a branch of thinking that would be the opposite. It holds that creation is bad; the world is flawed beyond repair, the flesh is evil, - do you know what I mean? It's done untold damage, that attitude; this idea of creation as bad, sinful, flawed and headed for fiery flames without being madedifferentsaved from sinfulness and shame of its existence. (that is very different from being renewed – but that's another sermon).

The message and work of Jesus of Nazareth is quite the opposite. He comes to us, born in our likeness, he comes to us in all our salty flesh to be light and salt - to bring out the goodness, to show the loveliness, , to enhance the flavour of what God has created in beauty and love.

This is a gospel of affirmation. This is the light and salt of the One who comes to say YES to who we are and to shine on us, warm us and season us until we grow into the fullness of who we are created to be.

AND who sends out his followers to do the same.

To be salt and light for the world.

Amen