

Salt and Light
Matthew 5:1-16
Sunday, February 9, 2014
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Where does one begin after the pageantry and beauty of last week? For those of you who weren't here, we welcomed clergy and friends to worship with us and bless us as we marked these three months of official beginning to my ministry here at St. Charles. I anticipated some of the magic of that day, but I found myself unprepared for the way it would feel to end my first 12 weeks of my first senior pastorate with the blessings of so many who are wishing us well.

They believe in what God is doing here. They believe in my calling. They believe in your gifts, your faith, your ability to love as Jesus loved. They are grateful for the heritage of who this congregation has been for decades. And those friends believe that God is at work here in a way that is both affirming and terrifying. They believe that we are at the edge of something not yet defined, and they are cheering us on. They prayed and laughed and feasted with us. They delighted in your company, in the essence of this city, and in the mysterious work of God's Spirit.

Then they all got in their cars or boarded flights out of town, and they left us here in the quiet of another day. We are the ones who live all of this out. What happens next is up to us.

We have welcomed, we have celebrated, we have given thanks, but the season of newness has shifted, and now our focus is toward the moment before us and the days ahead. As much as I would like to sit in that space just a little while longer...the new girl, the new era, and all of that. I felt so keenly last Monday that we have crossed into a new space. Now, we get to work.

What kind of work is it? For the past few Wednesday nights, we have been considering the work of the church and the calling of this particular community in New Orleans. We have circled around these ideas by asking, "Who Is My Neighbor?" We have looked at conversations that others are having about being a Missional church rather than an Attractional church. We've defined those terms, disagreed, picked apart, and sought to identify ourselves somewhere on the spectrum of drawing people into this place to make them just like us for our own sakes vs. sending people out into the world to be like God in the nooks and crannies of our work and school and neighborhood.

We're not either/or people here at St. Charles. We like a dash of contrariness with our conversations, and we want to consider the both/and or none of the above when we talk about how we define ourselves. Kicking around a few terms, concepts, and definitions has invited our Wednesday night crew to think theologically about what happens when we gather together as a congregation.

How and when and where do we experience God? What is happening when we come together for worship, study, and fellowship here? What is the purpose of our gatherings? Inviting the image of neighbor into our self-understanding helps us to reflect on our time together each week in two ways. We gather here for prayer, fellowship, learning, worship, conversation, lively debate, and personal community support. And after that, we carry all of those ways of being back out into the world and live them out there, too.

We gather to take care of each other, focus on our needs here, teach our children, and take care of ourselves. And we understand that good work to be part of a larger purpose in carrying compassion and kindness back out into the world for the common good. That doesn't mean we are trying to make all people like us; it means we seek to make the world more like God dreams it to be.

It means we are salt and light.

Last week, Fisher Humphreys introduced this section in Matthew's gospel known as the Sermon on the Mount saying, "Matthew intended his readers to understand that what happened by the Sea of Galilee was a pattern for their lives."

The scene has been building for the past three or four Sundays. Jesus was baptized by John, he left for the wilderness, then he emerged and began to gather an unexpected circle of disciples. His reputation is growing and the crowds around him reflect that. People want to be near Jesus, to be healed by him, to hear him teach, to look him in the eye. And Jesus sees all of this happening around him.

So he moves away from the crowd and goes up a mountain to sit. He takes a physical posture of authority and waits. His disciples follow him and go to the place where Jesus is sitting—a high and lifted up sort of place—and they sit before him as he begins to teach...

He tells them about the kingdom of God. He tells them what God loves and what God values. He draws them away from the crowd to give them the words that they themselves will go out and teach.

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

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

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

He interprets scripture, elaborates on his priorities and his focus. He teaches them to be honorable, to be bold, and to strive to be more together than they could have ever imagined to be by themselves. Jesus teaches them how to pray—earnestly, with integrity, with humility, and with a desire to welcome the ways of heaven into the ways of earth. Matthew goes on for three chapters as he captures the heart of Jesus’ teaching—Jesus’ Way. The disciples eventually are known as followers of The Way because they are living out these words so well—no longer on the mountain but in every places of life where their feet pass.

As modern day disciples, we are eavesdropping on this lesson, and we embrace the blessings for ourselves. In Jesus’ pronouncement about being salt and light, he was not calling the disciples into a new way of being. He was telling them that everything they needed to love God and love their neighbor was already in them. Likewise, Jesus’ words do not invite us to be something that we are not yet or to strive toward something that is humanly impossible in this broken, fragile world. Jesus is looking at those around him and telling them what he sees when he looks at them. You are salt. You are light.

We need to hear this about ourselves over and over again until we actually believe it. And we’ll know that belief has taken hold of us because our actions will reflect the goodness that God speaks into us. Our lives and our words will catch up. When we believe we carry God flavors and God brightness in us—because we were made in the very image of God to reflect God’s nature—then we move with intention.

In his commentary on Matthew, Douglas Hare points out, “‘The salt of the earth’ has been naturalized into the English language as a designation for people we regard as especially good.” Think on that for a second. When do we attribute that phrase to a person? “Oh, Jim. Bless his heart. He’s such a good guy. Just a ‘salt of the earth’ kind of guy.”

When we use that phrase as a compliment for a certain kind of person, “This makes it all the harder for us to appreciate how strange the phrase must have originally sounded.” The original intent would have been less about status (“You are the world’s

ethical elite”) and more about function (“You must add zest to the life of the whole world.”)¹

I always appreciate Eugene Peterson’s effort to create a fresh paraphrase of scripture for the times when we look at a passage so familiar that it has entered the common language. Peterson writes:

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. “Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God.

We are in the season after Epiphany—that was the Sunday that we talked about blessing each other and blessing the church. We shared in a communion meal, then we took pieces of chalk and marked a blessing board and even the bricks of this building with words of hope and prayer and affirmation.

Jill Crainshaw of Wake Forest Divinity School writes, “These texts for the Sundays after the Epiphany, and perhaps especially the parabolic light, lamps, and salt Jesus speaks about..., are reminders of the sacramentality of life. The word “epiphany” means manifestation; on Epiphany Day and throughout the season (where a season of Epiphany is observed), people seek and gain clarity about who this Jesus really is who was born in Bethlehem, who was visited by a dove when he was baptized in the Jordan River (First Sunday after the Epiphany), who changed water into wine at a wedding feast (Second Sunday after the Epiphany in Year C), who spoke in parables about such earthy elements as salt and light. God reveals God’s self in the person of Jesus; God reveals God’s self in salt and light; God reveals God’s self in God’s people.”²

¹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press 1993), p. 44.

² Jill Crainshaw, <http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=47>

The sacramentality of life. This means Jesus' words are invitations to understand that our very lives are signs of a spiritual reality. Our lives can demonstrate what God is like. So Jesus gets at this transformational notion with as many images as he can muster because the lesson needs to be absorbed by those who are listening.

You are salt. Be salt. You are light. Be light.

“Liturgical scholar Linda Gibler puts it this way: ‘The Universe is God-drenched. Every being, form and particle of the Universe mediates and responds to God’s blessing and has something to teach those who listen.’ This idea is echoed in the text for this Sunday. Human beings are created to shine with God’s light, to respond to God’s blessing by making God’s presence manifest through everyday living.”³

But we don’t always live this out, right? That’s not a secret. One of the steadiest criticisms of the church today is that we are all hypocrites. We preach something in here that we don’t embody out there. To that end, Jim Somerville, pastor of First Baptist Richmond, VA, shared yesterday that he was debating whether or not he would include a critique of the 21st century church. He writes, “As I was studying the Sermon on the Mount last week I had a feeling that Jesus might be disappointed in the way his church has evolved. In that moment, on that hillside in Galilee, he may have seen the potential of those people to “bring out all the God-flavors of the earth,” and to “bring out all the God-colors of the world” (as Eugene Peterson puts it). He may have pictured those who were poor, and meek, and mourning transformed by the coming Kingdom into a great force for good in the world, and spreading out over the face of the earth in a way that would bless, and help, and heal. And although there’s been some of that—no, actually, a lot of that—there’s also been a lot of building up of our own little kingdoms, creating these beautiful boxes called churches where we can come on Sunday morning to sing hymns and say prayers and listen to a sermon and then go home again. And I can’t imagine that that’s what Jesus—this Jesus, anyway—had in mind.”

Russell Rathbun is a pastor and blogger who maintains a fantastic web resource called Question the Text. In his study of today’s passage, he joins Jim Somerville in his honest assessment that we are teaching something that we repeatedly fail to live out: “Jesus gives us a set of principles that are rooted in love, forgiveness, reconciliation and purity of thought. They are inspiring, moving, and clearly, if put to practice, would

³ Jill Crainshaw: Linda Gibler, *From the Beginning to Baptism: Scientific and Sacred Stories of Water, Oil, and Fire* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2010), 16.

reconfigure the way the world works. I do not think any one is reading the Sermon on the Mount and disagreeing with ideas, no one is saying it is a list of really bad ideas. It is not that people don't want to live this way, they just don't. Here is a set of principles that will guarantee justice and mercy, peace and love for all people, yet it is not implemented, it has not been adopted by all people. I don't live that way and you don't live that way and as a result there is injustice, suffering, pain and hatred."

We don't speak up for injustice, we don't work to overturn harmful policies and practices. We bask in the comforts that our privilege affords. We soak in our anger and our grudges. So do we give up? Do we quit coming together and gathering because we fail at being kind and fail at loving our neighbor as ourselves and fail at making things right in this world? Well, of course not.

We need to come together if we ever hope to remember who we really are. We need days like last Sunday when people come from other states to be here and speak words of gratitude and hope and blessing. We need to cheer each other on in that same way. "Don't forget, sister, you are the salt of the earth!" "Remember, brother, you are the light of the world!"

We need to write it on our hands and stick a note on the fridge so we don't forget. We're out of bread, milk, and go shine light on the God-colors of this world. Pay the bills, pick up the dry cleaning, and bring out the God-flavors around you today.

You are the salt of the earth. Be salt.

You are the light of the world. Be light.

May it be so. Amen.