

You Are...
Matthew 5: 13-20
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We continue today in the Sermon on the Mount, found in chapters 5, 6 & 7 of Matthew's gospel. Last week we began spending time with the Sermon on the Mount, reflecting on Jesus words in the first 12 verses known as "The Beatitudes". Here Jesus tells us what moves the heart of God, to say we are blessed. He describes the conditions and circumstances of our lives that serve as signs of God's reign in our midst and which help us to become blessed people.

Last Sunday Don reminded us, "The Beatitudes are not so much something you and I do, as they are who you and I become in the process of the journey, as we follow Christ and the way of Christ."

In today's passage, Jesus expands upon what he says in the Beatitudes. Using the metaphors of salt and light, he addresses two foundational questions for us, his blessed disciples. "*Who are we? And what are we to do?*"

Today if we describe someone as *the salt of the earth*, we pay him or her a great compliment. By this we affirm their great worth and reliability. We are making the point that they represent the best and noblest of our shared values.

Likewise Jesus affirms his disciples when he says to us: "*You are the salt of the earth*". By this, he is emphasizing the purpose of our blessedness. He is referring to our great worth.

Just as salt preserves or enhances the taste of food, Jesus is saying that we have within us the capacity to make a wonderful difference to the world around us. We have the capacity to bring goodness and blessing.

However, with his affirmation that we are the salt of the earth, Jesus offers a warning as well. He warns that we may lose the capacity to make a difference for God and the world if we do not live out our calling as his disciples.

In the Beatitudes Jesus describes how we become blessed. Now he speaks of what we are to do as his blessed disciples, as a blessed community.

He reminds us that our purpose in God's kingdom is to bring blessing to others. We are intended to reflect God's light to the world. We are blessed to be a blessing. Our lives as individuals and as a community are meant to bear witness to God's reign on earth.

“In verses 17-20 Jesus reminds us that because of who he is and how he understands his mission that he enables us to be salt and light.¹

To understand today’s passage, it is helpful to know the context in which Jesus speaks. He speaks to people in a culture where religion and politics are never separated. His listeners are people of Israel living under the rule of the Roman Empire. He is speaking to a community where there is great anxiety and disagreement among factions over what they are to do in light of their political circumstances.

Disagreeing factions within first century Judaism are the Sadducees, the Zealots and the Pharisees. They are divided over how to live and respond to the reality of their foreign occupation.

- The Sadducees are realists, favoring self-preservation by collaborating with the occupier.
- The Zealots are ready to take up arms and fight.
- The Pharisees have divisions among them. Some also favor fighting. However, the others want nothing to do with that. Their focus is on preserving their cultural and religious identity as a people called and set apart for God. They choose to withdraw unto themselves, delving into deeper study and practice the Torah.

When Jesus criticizes the Pharisees in today’s passage, he is not saying that they are bad people for keeping the Torah. What he takes issue with is how they withdraw unto themselves, protecting their righteousness and identity for some future time when they expect God to do a new thing.

Against their withdrawal, Jesus proclaims the good news of the breaking in of God’s kingdom. God is already doing a new thing! The reign of God has begun! Israel is called to get out there, to be the holy nation God intends them to be, a light to all the nations.

Jesus does not reject the Torah. In fact, he makes clear that he has come to fulfill the law and the prophets. He will bring their purposes to completion in everyday community that reflects the kingdom of God.

Jesus commissions his disciples to do the same, telling us: *You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.* Live into that! That is our calling as Christian disciples. That is our calling as Christ’s Church.

Archbishop William Temple once said, *“The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.”* I love that! We are salt. We are light not for ourselves but for the world.

One of my great joys as a pastor is working with the new member class. I love serving in this ministry of welcome. I love meeting and getting acquainted with new people God brings to our faith community. I love hearing their stories and learning of their passions and interests.

I also love introducing Westminster to people new to our community, sharing all that is going on in and through this vibrant and faithful congregation. Words cannot adequately describe the blessing I receive being a part of a congregation who takes seriously Christ's call to discipleship, who take seriously your call to be salt and light in the world.

Right now our nation is in desperate need of people who take seriously the call of Christ to live as the salt of the earth, to shine as the light of the world. The current political tensions in our nation are pulling us apart at the seams. Civility and respect seem to be in short supply these days.

I do not know about you, but I am bone tired weary of the vitriol I hear regularly spewing in the political arena, in the news and on social media. It is disheartening and demoralizing.

As followers of Jesus, what are we to do? How are we to live and behave in the context of our time, in midst of the challenges facing our nation and the world? How are we to be salt? How are we to be light?

The tensions swirling around us can lead us into fear, anger, hopelessness and cynicism. However, they also present us with an opportunity. This is an opportunity to reassess our values and to remember our highest loyalty is to God's kingdom and to the values of God's kingdom that Jesus demonstrates.

Jesus reminds us: "*You are the salt of the earth* "*You are the light of the world.*" Notice Jesus doesn't say, "If you want to be salt and light you need to do this or that to become it". No, he tells us plainly, "*You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.*" Not some day... Not maybe, if..., Not you will be... No, he tells us, you *are!* You *are* right now!

Jesus says this as a sure thing. It flows from our being blessed as he describes in The Beatitudes. "*Blessed are you: who are **poor in spirit**; who **mourn**; who are **meek**; who **hunger and thirst for righteousness**; who are **merciful**; who are **pure in heart**; who are **persecuted for righteousness sake**; who are **blessed when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account...***".

You are blessed... You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world.

No matter what our political affiliation is or how we vote, we are still to be salt. We are still to be light. So lift up your light and lift it even higher when the darkness threatens to engulf us in fear, anger and cynicism across our political divisions.

Jesus offers wisdom for these troubling times. He reminds us who we are and whose we are. He reminds us of God's light within us, a light meant to illuminate the darkness around us, making a difference for good in the world and in our nation.

“So how do we do that? Well, we do what is right. We follow Jesus.

We remember that the truth of the gospel is our currency.

We honor those who are most vulnerable: the poor, the sick, the very young and the very old, those with disabilities.

We speak up and advocate for those with no voice.

We welcome the immigrant, the refugee, and the stranger as if we were welcoming Jesus himself.

We work for fairness and justice. We lift up people of all races, nationalities, religions and different gender identities, even if we do not fully understand.

We live in hope. And, we live with integrity, doing what is right even when no one is looking.

We love and pray for our enemies.

We humbly listen to one another, aware that we may be wrong.

We look for the best in those with whom we disagree.

We say not only to those who are like us, but also especially to those who are different from us: *You are a beloved child of God. We have your back.*²

That is what Jesus does. This is what Jesus teaches us to do.

The world is watching. Live into your identity and purpose in Christ. You are Christ's Church. Remember who you are. You *are* the salt of the earth! You *are* the light of the world!

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. p.334, Marcia Y. Riggs, Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 1

2. Melissa Bane Sevier, <https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2017/01/30/be-the-light-2/>