

Salt and Light (2010)

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Matthew 5:1-16

After he returned from being tested in the wilderness, Jesus set to work in Galilee, proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom, calling disciples, and healing the sick. People took notice, and they flocked to Jesus.

When he saw the crowds, [Jesus] went up onto the hillside. After he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he opened his mouth and taught them.

The poor in spirit are fortunate, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Those who are grieving are fortunate, because they will be comforted.

The gentle are fortunate, because they will inherit the earth.

Those who are hungering and thirsting for justice are fortunate, because they will be satisfied.

Those who show mercy are fortunate, because they will receive mercy.

The pure-hearted are fortunate, because they will see God.

The peacemakers are fortunate, because they will be called God's children.

Those who are persecuted for the sake of justice are fortunate, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

You are fortunate whenever [people] insult you, persecute you, and speak all sorts of evil against you for my sake. Rejoice, be glad, because your reward in heaven is great; that is how they persecuted the prophets before you.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its flavor, how will it be salted? It's good for nothing any longer, except to be thrown outside and trampled by people.

You are the light of the world. A city cannot be hidden when it lies on top of a hill. People don't light a lamp and put it under a bucket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. Let your light shine before people in the same way, so that they will see the good things you do, and glorify your Father in heaven.

Children's Story

Barb Aryan was helping her dad in the kitchen. They were making a big pot of chicken soup. They started with water and chicken. They added onions and carrots, potatoes and green beans. But that wasn't all. They also added noodles and parsley and fresh thyme. And they let it all simmer together. When the carrots were cooked and the noodles were soft, Barb and her dad tasted the soup. They could taste the chicken and potatoes. They could taste the parsley and thyme. But the soup didn't really taste all that good. Something was missing. Something that would bring out all the flavors in the pot. Something that would bind all those flavors together.

That's when Barb spoke up. "Dad, do you think maybe the soup needs a little salt?" Of course! Salt! Salt was the missing ingredient. So they added some salt, and let the soup simmer. Then they tasted it again. This time it was delicious! All the soup had needed was salt. In a pot of soup, salt is like a little bit of magic. Salt makes every other ingredient in the soup taste better.

One day Jesus told a crowd of people, "You are the salt of the earth." I wonder what he meant by that.

Sermon

Sometimes when we read the Bible, we miss the point. For example, I often hear people quoting Jesus, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). They quote Jesus, while completely missing his point that God claims us and all things completely and that against this Caesar has no claim. Something similar often happens with the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). I've usually heard the Sermon on the Mount taken as Jesus' message to the church. But that's not what it is. That misses the point!

The Sermon on the Mount is part of Jesus' message, his word and action message, for Israel.

When Jesus climbs that hillside, he does so as a new Moses who is regathering Israel around himself and instructing them about life in the kingdom of God, the kingdom that begins with his incarnation, takes root through his resurrection, and grows by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus teaches the people gathered around him about anger and adultery, about promises and prayer, about fear and fruitfulness. In between, he says this: "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world."

Now, Jesus does not say that — this is the point we often miss — Jesus does not say that to the church, represented by the disciples sitting in front of him. No, he says it to the whole crowd gathered there, Jews from Galilee and the Decapolis, from Judea and Jerusalem. He says it, in other words, to Israel. Israel is salt and light.

Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth." With those words, he calls Israel to covenant faithfulness. They are the chosen children of Abraham — Abraham, through whom humankind would be restored from ruin and the creation rescued from decay. Israel is God's gift to the world. Just as Elisha's salt transformed the waters of Jericho (cf. 2 Kings 2), so a faithful Israel would transform the world.

Jesus also says, "You are the light of the world." With those words, too, he calls Israel to covenant faithfulness. The people of the earth will be blessed when they recognize and honor God as God. So when Israel at last fulfills her servant role to be a light to the nations, God will be glorified and blessing will abound.

Salt and light, for the glory of God and for the blessing of the world, that is who Israel is. And that is what Jesus himself, taking on the role of Israel for the sake of Israel and for the sake of the world — that's what Jesus himself embodies, in words and actions, through his faithfulness to God's covenant, faithfulness manifested in obedience, in suffering, in death. And through his resurrection, blessing is turned loose in the world!

Now, what are we the church to do with Jesus' message, his word and action message, for Israel? Often we've applied that message directly to the church: "Church of Jesus, you are the salt of the earth. Church of Jesus, you are the light of the world." I think that misses the point. Here's why.

In his Gospel, John tells of the resurrected Jesus empowering his disciples for their mission. As he breathes the Spirit into them, Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21). Now, Jesus was sent by the Father to Israel, to call Israel to covenant faithfulness and himself to lead the way in that faithfulness, even to the point of suffering and dying, all for the sake of Israel's calling to be a light for the nations. We the church are sent by Jesus to the world, sent to call the world, all humanity, to covenant faithfulness, suffering and even dying if we must, all for the sake of the human calling in the world.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' message to Israel, a message he himself embodied. That message is a pattern for us, for the message we bring to the world, a message that we are to embody as well. But ours is a different message, a different message about a different covenant than the covenant made with Israel. And so we need to transpose Jesus' message to Israel into a different key, into the proper key where it can rightly be heard as God's message to the world. What does that mean? It means we link the message to another covenant, to the first covenant, and then, in words and actions, we bring that message to the world.

The message we bring runs along these lines. Remember, Jesus called Israel to covenant faithfulness. The covenant had been made between God and Abraham. God said, "I will be your God; I will bless you; I will make you a blessing." Later, through Moses, that covenant was given specific shape for Israel. God said, "You will be my holy people. You will be a royal nation. You will be a kingdom of priests." Jesus called Israel to be faithful to this covenant. And he himself embodied faithfulness to this covenant, with all it implied in terms of obedience and suffering.

Our task in the church is to call all humanity to covenant faithfulness, in this case faithfulness to the first covenant. In that first covenant, God says to human beings, "I have made you in my image, therefore I give you dominion over all things and appoint you as my stewards over all creation." That's the covenant, the covenant stated in the very first chapters of the Bible. And here's the message, some of it at least, the message we bring to all humanity, to every nation, to our neighbors, to our own community, and to its leaders.

We say, “You are made in God’s image. You are made to reflect the character of God, as seen especially in Jesus. Therefore, be wise, be compassionate, be honest and true, be just, be merciful and forgiving, be humble.”

We say, “You have been given dominion. You have power and authority. Use it to restrain sin and evil; use it to establish institutions of learning and healing and peace; use it to shape society justly, never abandoning the poor, the broken-down, the mentally ill, the elderly, the helpless — never abandoning them to cruel fate, and never exploiting or abusing people for the sake of power or money or sex.”

We say, “You are God’s stewards. As stewards, look after air, water, and soil. Look after streets, homes, and schools. Support businesses, arts, and music. Leave the world and the community more beautiful than they were when you received them. And never think that what you have is yours to accumulate or to do with whatever you please. Because none of it belongs to you. It all belongs to God.”

That’s our message, some of it.

This message, by the way, is not focused on individuals. This is a message for the nations, for peoples, as is clear from the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Peoples and nations and communities and schools are called to keep God’s covenant with all humanity: to display God’s image, to exercise wise and responsible dominion, and to be good stewards, in other words, to be salt and light in the world, so that people and creation may flourish.

At the great BREAD assembly tomorrow evening, we will call community leaders to be faithful to this basic, human covenant, especially as it applies to crumbling neighborhoods and to school-age children who, because of too many circumstances beyond their control, need the entire community to work together to make it possible for them to have better outcomes in their lives.

We the church will issue the call tomorrow evening together with others. That is right and a good thing. In that setting, however, the message may, of necessity, lack some of its theological edge. But when the church speaks, not in concert with others, but as the church, the theological edge will be clear. When the church speaks as the church, we say explicitly, “You are made in God’s image; you have been given dominion; you are God’s stewards.” Delivering that message is part of our mission. It’s why Jesus sent us!

But that’s only some of the message, the word part. There are also the actions, which may be the hardest part and may be the most important part. We ourselves, the church, are to do every bit of the message we proclaim. We are to display the image of God, for example, by being sure to speak truth instead of slogans. We are to exercise wise and responsible dominion, for example, by developing partnerships with principals and teachers for the sake of kids, partnerships, not adversarial relationships, doing our best to work together and doing it in the name of Jesus, who reconciles everything to himself. And we are to be faithful stewards, for example, by doing what we can to help people stay in and take care of their homes.

We are to so embody the message, that we will be able to say, “Look at us! We’ll show you some of the many ways to be faithful to our shared, human calling. Look at us! We’ll show you some ways to be salt and light in the world.”

But, of course, in none of this can we be anything less than self-critical, in none of this can we be anything less than honest, about our own failures to live up to the high, human calling. We have to acknowledge, to ourselves and to the wider world, where we have failed.

That’s one of the things that’s so troubling about the recent and recurring sex abuse scandals afflicting the Roman Catholic Church. It’s bad enough that abuse like that has happened, an utter failure to look after precious children. It’s bad enough that the church has responded to it very poorly year after year after year, a repeated failure to use power wisely and well. What only makes it worse, though, is that the church seems to be having a hard time admitting the extent of its failures. That’s not surprising. Every human institution tends to become fixated, to one degree or another, on its own survival. Hence the cover-ups and the sweeping of things under the rug.

And our churches are not exempt from this. We have our own tales of abuse and failure to tell — to own up to and to make amends for, humbly, because humility is at the core of the human calling. And in humility, we have to be honest both about what we hope to be and do and about our repeated failures to get there.

At the same time, however, we have to be honest, too, about our hope, our hope that by the Spirit we can be and we shall be here and there faithful to our covenant calling, on the way to the kingdom in which all will, at last, be well.

We leave here today, sent by Jesus with a message for the world. We have a message to proclaim and to live. There is, of course, much more for us to discern about this message, and much more expected of us in terms of what we say and what we put into practice. May God help us, in words and actions, to deliver his message to the world, and to Columbus, every day.