

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany February 5, 2023- Annual meeting

Matthew 5:13-20

We continue this week with the next part of Jesus' first sermon in Matthew, what is often called the Sermon on the Mount. Last week we had the preamble that set the tone for this whole sermon. A re-framing of what makes people honored in the eyes of God and humans.

Honored are the hopeless poor, the doormats for others, those who hunger and thirst for justice and vindication. Honored are those who help the former, who are merciful, who are shalom makers in the world, who persist in following God in thought and action even when others resist.

Then the turn, from Jesus speaking about them to speaking to us.

Now, something to note here is that every time Jesus says "you" it is plural. You would hear this in the Greek but unless you are down South (Ya'll) we don't hear it and so tend to imagine Jesus is talking to me as an individual. But Jesus is addressing the gathering of disciples, the whole of the community and that is important with what is to come. Jesus is talking to us as a community.

Honored are ya'll, Jesus says, when people revile and persecute ya'll and utter all kinds of evil things about ya'll because ya'll are following me into the reign of heaven in thought and action.

This week Jesus continues that thought in his sermon. Which picks up right after our text last week.

Ya'll are the salt of the earth. Ya'll are the light of the world.

We talked about salt on Wednesday and agreed that salt has many uses. It makes fries taste great, when added to many foods brings out their best flavor. It was used in the ancient world as a preservative- keeping meat and other foodstuffs from spoiling. Making it valuable enough to be used as money. The Latin word for salt is the root of our word salary. While it stings like the dickens, it can help heal wounds and keep them free from infection. Ever treat a sore throat by gargling salt water? Here in the Midwest, it keeps our travel in winter safe by melting ice and softens our water here in Ely. Salt makes the things it is used on be an even better version of themselves, it preserves, heals, keeps from decay. It keeps us safe and makes our lives better.

While every grain of salt is important. While it is good that you yourself are a grain of salt, it does its best work together. One grain won't salt those fries, but a bunch will. One grain won't melt the ice, but a whole bunch will. When ya'll as the church that is St. John act together to be salt to those around us. They will be better versions of themselves. We will bring them healing, preserve them, make their lives better and safer. Ya'll are the salt.

Ya'll are the light of the world.

We talked about light as well, on Wednesday. Light helps us see so we can get things done. It can warm us. It can brighten our mood on long dreary winter days. It can be a beacon to call us to safety at night, or invite us into a warm place for a hot meal. It can help to disinfect items, provides Vitamin D for our bodies. Ya'll be that, Jesus says.

This one is a little more interesting. We know Jesus says in John (and we sing in our Advent worship) that he is- the light of the world. The light no darkness can overcome. If Jesus is the light, how can we be the light? I wonder if it is not so much we are the light, but more about how the light is shone. Someone once said that the moon is the promise that the sun will shine tomorrow. Why? Does the moon produce its own light? No! It reflects the light of the sun. The lamp is not the light, but is the means by which the light shines. And the purpose of the lamp cannot be fulfilled under cover. It can't be shy. Its purpose is to shine the light, so that people can see, they can have warmth and comfort. Hope. So that they might find safety. To bring healing and health.

Ya'll be those things Jesus says. Together.

We have celebrated and will see some more reports here soon about the ways in which we have been salt and light in the world together this past year. And I am deeply thankful for this community of faith and the partnership we have shared in the Gospel over these last almost six years.

We have grown together, faced many challenges, especially in the last two years, and are on the cusp of another period of living more fully into who God has called and equipped us to be.

I would invite you to look at my Pastor's Report and read that, but you will find towards the end that I have a number of challenges for us in this year of 2023. I will touch on two of those now.

The first very much relates to our gospel text. I challenge us to grow as a community. To get to know better the individual grains that make up the salt that

is St. John. The people who make up our ya'll. We have spent the better part of two years apart from each other. New faces have joined us over that time. We are a different community. So, I think one of the things we need to do is just to get to know one another again. To reconnect, so that we can better be the Body of Christ. Bringing out the best in our community members, healing them, preserving them. Shining a light to keep them warm, safe, hopeful. I challenge us to be intentional in this year in doing that. Just getting to know who we are together.

I challenge us to continue to deepen our faith. For that, I need you to help me by letting me know what you want. What you need to do that. I saw a lot of good response to our Advent series where we just took some simple steps to pause, breathe, release, receive. Is that kind of faith practice what works best? Are you interested in more delving into scripture? Current topics. What does your soul crave for? Let me know. In the meantime, keep praying, breathing, and join us in reading through the Bible in a year.

More than anything, what Jesus' comments today tell us is that no one individual embodies salt or light. Certainly not me. Rather, the full community is needed to create what most resembles the salt and light that Jesus talks about.

One thing to note here, is that Jesus says these two things in a way that indicates an existing condition. It's not so much, become this. It's more, you are this. Ya'll are salt. Ya'll are light. Go be that. Just, be what you are.

I often ask the question of confirmands about whether an orange tree can produce snickers. As much as we might wish so, it can't. Why not? Because that is not what it is.

Being salt, being light, being beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased is as simple as being what we already are. And it is as difficult as that, because sometimes we forget what we are. But, together, in community-gathering regularly around the Word of God, the Meal and the Bath, we can grow more into that kind of community for the sake of the world. I pray in 2023 that it might be so.