

“Salt and Light”
 February 5, 2017
 Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
 Text: Matthew 5:13-20

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Introduction

So, picking up from last week, we are up on the mountain. The Sea of Galilee is out on the horizon. The crowd of people following Jesus has now climbed up the mountain and are listening to him speak. Jesus is delivering what is now known as the Sermon on the Mount. That day it's simply the good news that people have been craving for so long. Jesus has just spoken the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...The kingdom has been opened to everyone. And now Jesus will explain what this means for the entire rest of his sermon. And it begins with today's passage and Jesus naming the identity of the ones sitting in front of him. He does this with vivid imagery as his voice rolls down the mountain.

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In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Oh, Island Heights United Methodist Church, if ever there was a message for us, this is it. If ever there were perfect metaphors to describe us, these are them. *You are the salt of the earth.* We know from salt. We live at the shore where the river meets the bay which meets the Atlantic. We know from salt. We put on some great breakfasts and dinners and we understand food. Plus, we are salty characters. I am getting to know some of you more all the time, and I know you know what it means to bring the flavor. You are the salt of the earth.

And Jesus said, *"You are the light of the world. And a city built on a hill cannot be hid."* They call it Island Heights for a reason. We are the second highest elevation along the coast of the entire eastern seaboard. And from atop the heights sits a spiritual center where the light of good news shines from those who gather for worship, who deepen their faith, and who then go out in mission. That light cannot be hidden. It cannot and will not be covered up. As Jesus says, once it's lit, it's as if it's put on a lampstand and brings light to all in the house. I've seen you shine. You are that light.

Bring Light to the Darkness

Jesus has communicated through all time to all the faithful; but he also speaks specifically to individuals and local churches. So, hear him say, *"You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world."* Some say we are living in times of great peril, and that the world is on the brink of disaster. Others say this is the most exciting time in the history of the world to be alive. One thing is clear. We are living in times of unprecedented change. We are in an extended period of unknowing, and this is the age of unsettledness. A major shift is occurring globally in the wake of technology, emerging economies, geo-political upheaval, and never-ending warfare, and no one is sure how it will all settle down. We are in what writer and speaker Susan Beaumont would call the "liminal space." It's that uncomfortable time between leaving the place we once knew so well, but not having yet arrived at the place we are going. It's a journey through darkness. It is happening globally and locally, and it is happening outside and inside the Church.

It's also the case for the people Jesus is speaking to on the mountain in today's passage. Their world is about to change in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but it has not yet taken place. The whole world is about to be turned upside down, but they don't see it yet. And in the midst of this, Jesus names them the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world." The kingdom of heaven is breaking in and Jesus, seeing value in his followers, calls them to light the way for others through the current darkness. Is our call not the same?

Righteousness

But there is more to it. Last week we heard Jesus say, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled." Righteousness. Doing the right thing. Good ethics. Morality. Purenness of heart. These things matter. Some may think that because Jesus had so many run-ins with the Pharisees, one of the groups of

religious leaders of the day, that he was somehow lax or opposing the laws of the ancient scriptures. But Jesus said,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

What does this mean? We arrive at another mystery of God. No one has been able to ever keep the law, from the time Moses wrote them down, to the first century when Jesus preached on the mountain, to this day. Hear the truth: one way or another, we have all broken all of the commandments. But now we hear Jesus say,

"Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Doing and teaching the commandments. Learning to do the right thing. Righteousness matters in this kingdom that Jesus is always preaching about.

"For I tell you," Jesus says, *"unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

But the scribes and the Pharisees are the gold standard. Yet now Jesus is calling us to go beyond the gold standard. This is an unmistakable call is to be righteous. Begin to taste that, salty people of light. The call to righteousness is beyond impossible, but hear the good news! Faith in Jesus the Christ ensures it. So, what does this righteousness look like? And how will it relate to the world in which we live? Beginning next week Jesus explains what this all means as we get on to the next section of his Sermon on the Mount.

Mission

But for today, the missional instruction is clear: Shine your light and bring the flavor. Be salt and light. The world *will* perish without some salt to preserve it and spice it up. Humanity *will* continue to stumble in darkness without a light to show the way. You *are* the salt of the earth, and you *are* the light of the world. People will recognize inhabitants of the kingdom of heaven by these characteristics. And knowing full well that you are identified and valued by the one who calls you, do and teach righteousness from the perspective of inhabitants of that kingdom. Amen.