

Salt and Light

Isaiah 58:1-9

Matthew 5:13-20

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, February 5, 2017

The long and often lamentable story of God's relationship with us is candidly documented in both the Old and New Testaments. Instead of being harmonious, it comes off as a tug-of-war. Doing everything possible except revoking our free will, God keeps pulling us away from the precipice while we keep pulling towards it.

The first tug of the rope is reported in the story of Adam and Eve. Wanting to believe that biting into the forbidden fruit would make them free agents, they swallowed the lie and paid the consequences.

Unfortunately, their consequences were passed down to us. Fortunately, God wants this crazy game of tug of war to stop.

Being all-knowing, God expected all this to happen. And since we could never save ourselves from the mess we created, God put into motion a rescue plan.

From where we sit, at the worst God's plan failed miserably. At best God's plan is still a work in progress and we just have to be patient.

Patient or not, all we can do is wait for the final victory without realizing it's already been won.

Jesus stepping out of the tomb on Easter morning was the beginning of the great reversal. Until then, the creation was in a downward spiral. By his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus reversed the trend and reset a new course to the future when the new heaven and earth are finally and completely one.

Until that happens, Jesus left behind precise instructions to live in this present age as if the future kingdom is already here.

Living faithfully in the present while anticipating the future is in keeping with Jesus' cryptic proclamation, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." For Jesus, living faithfully in the present as if God's kingdom is already here is a non-negotiable condition set down in the Sermon on the Mount.

Last Sunday we reviewed the Beatitudes (or blessings) God gives to the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers, the merciful and the persecuted. After warning us of the persecutions to come, Jesus introduced two iconic metaphors describing the disciple's two essential tasks.

The first is, “You are the salt of the earth.”

Jesus reasoned, “...if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It’s no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.”

It sounds harsh but give Jesus credit, he’s being transparent. He doesn’t want anybody no good for anything following him.

The salt metaphor insinuates our dependence on salt. Beside seasoning our food, salt is used in remedies to get out wine stains, cure insect bites and deice winter roads. In earlier times, our great grand parents needed salt to preserve meats. In ancient times, salt was used in Jewish rituals and since it was such a precious commodity it was used as currency in the Roman Empire.

“You are the salt of the earth,” communicates the message we’re a precious commodity needed to keep the world from decaying long enough for the Kingdom of God to take root and grow.

Something else: When food is salted it becomes part of the food. Likewise, Jesus depends on us to get involved in the world’s problems but we have to be careful and not blend in too much. We can become so earthly bound we’re no heavenly good.

Both the Bible and Church history tell the story of God’s people in every generation making the mistake of following the example of worldly politicians to protect and preserve the authority of the religious establishment.

For example, in Jesus’ era there were three competing camps in Judea: The Sadducees or temple priests, the Zealots, the revolutionaries who committed terrorism to usher in the God’s Kingdom and the Pharisees who preached a practice of faith that was very personal and totally inward.

The Sadducees were collaborators. Today we’d call them Quislings or Benedict Arnolds. Convincing themselves they were doing the Lord’s work, they crafted an unholy alliance with their Romans masters to preserve their position and authority.

On the other extreme we have the Zealots They were all about fighting a war of liberation. Fully aware of the power and cruelty of Rome, they willingly sacrificed the lives of the innocent as they prayed for a warlike Messiah to lead them into holy war.

As it turned out, more than once they placed their bet on the wrong horse, backing the next charismatic leader claiming to be the anointed one. The results were always catastrophic, finally ending in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, followed by the mass deportation of Jews throughout the empire.

In the middle were our old friends the Pharisees. They were all about isolating themselves from pagan influences and excommunicating anyone who didn’t follow their rules. Having no political ambitions, they were committed to holding the fort, keeping Israel’s

covenant with God operative until the real Messiah finally appeared and made Israel great again.

All three camps initially courted Jesus to further their agendas until they realized Jesus had different ideas.

Jesus wasn't about playing politics or crafting diplomacy to form a nation state. He also made clear he was against making war on Rome. What's more, Jesus spoke openly against the mismanagement of the temple and predicted its destruction. Instead, Jesus told them all, "My kingdom is not of this world."

So, Jesus instructed his disciples to be in the world but not of it. Instead of entering in the competition to dominate the world system, Jesus would have us follow the example of the Old Testament prophets and advocated for justice and peace in the land the same as there is in heaven. Read the gospels. Jesus spent most of his ministry looking after the lost and left behind. He didn't want revolution or a theocracy or isolating ourselves from the world's troubles.

We are to be the salt of the earth.

Being the salt of the earth means following Jesus and no one else. Otherwise we end up being no good for anything because we'd compromise our saltiness and allegiance to Christ.

"You are the salt of the earth,"

You can take this metaphor two ways. One way is in a positive light, preserving and giving flavor to people in need of both. Being kind and generous with your time and energy and encouraging someone who feels lost and defeated, these are ways to be salt of the earth.

The second interpretation is rougher. To be salty means to be irritating. Sometimes we have to be the pebble in the shoe or a thorn in the side to get the attention of those running things in the wrong direction.

That's what God requires of us, to salt the earth in spite of persecution, by receiving and dispensing God's blessings lovingly yet equally assertively as we wait for God's kingdom to come near.

The second metaphor: "You are the light of the world.... No one puts a lighted lamp under a 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 they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven."

Our secular culture gets cranky when people of faith aren't shy about their faith. Since childhood we've been carefully taught not to mention God in polite society.

Even so, there are times to let your light shine by putting your faith into practice. Shining your light helps others see God charting a course leading them into the kingdom that's coming nearer and nearer.

But be careful. Don't be Sadducees manipulating people and events to keep in power. Don't be Zealots, who take matters into their own hands while trying to force God's hand. Don't be Pharisees who let their lights shine brighter than God's.

Instead, be guided by the Spirit, not your instincts, so you say and do the right thing at the right time. And remember, it's not our job to set the agenda or chart the course. Our job is to quiet ourselves, listen to God's voice and then let God be God. After all, that's God's job. When we jump the gun and take off before praying things through, we only make a bigger mess God has to clean up.

Maybe it would be helpful to look at it this way, we're in sales, not management. We sell Christ and his kingdom by being Christ-like, kind and humble but also brave and assertive. That's how we earn peoples trust.

Realizing this should lift a burden from our shoulders. We aren't expected to be PhD's in theology, or the second coming of Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King. We don't need to have all the answers to life's questions. We do need to be in prayer every day to be in sync with God's will and then put it into motion. Strive for these things and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Today's sermon began with lamenting our tug of war with God that translates into our tug-of-war with each other.

There's something disturbing if not sickening about what's happening today. Our nation is more divided then anytime I can remember. This past week I've heard sad stories of friendships and families being broken apart over politics. Sons and daughters are cutting themselves off from their mothers and fathers. Longtime friends no longer speak with each other. Bloggers, Instagram addicts, partisan commentators on both sides of the spectrum, and politicians pandering to their constituents have fueled the fire that's consuming the quality of our lives. Civility is no longer a virtue. The Sadducees, the Zealots and the Pharisees are riding high.

I can't believe Jesus would ever countenance any of this. He didn't then, he wouldn't now. It's one thing to disagree with one another, it's another thing to hate and dehumanize one another.

All the more reason to rediscover the Sermon on the Mount. That doesn't mean abandoning your convictions. It does mean submitting your convictions to Christ. Even if you're right, you still have the obligation to be poor in spirit, mournful of the state we put ourselves in, meek and merciful, pure in heart and above all, peacemakers.

If you do try being a voice of reason in this toxic environment, talking to friends and family members about being reconciled with their friends and family members, be prepared to be persecuted. If you are persecuted, rejoice and be glad. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets were before you.

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth.” and “You are the light of the world.” If we lose our saltiness and hide our light, shame on us. If we stand with Christ and preach his gospel, God bless us.

Again, Jesus didn’t come to accommodate the world system. He didn’t come to improve the world system. He came to turn the world system upside down until it’s right side up by dying on the cross to reverse the world’s suicidal trend.

What would Jesus have us do? I think he’d say, don’t abandon your convictions once they are endorsed by the Spirit and then fight the good fight. But first, make sure you’re on God’s side before saying, “God’s on my side.”

In short, follow Christ’s example. Be assertive but never aggressive. Speak the truth with love and let that love motivate your actions. That’s the essence of the Sermon on the Mount. That’s the essence of Jesus.

Go and do likewise. Be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, for his sake.
Amen.