

Just a Pinch

Matthew 5:13-16

Pendleton B. Peery

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

February 9, 2014

Last summer we spent a great deal of time focusing on God's instructions in the Ten Commandments that were given to Moses from the top of a mountain. When we hear about mountains in the scriptures our first thought should be "listen up." Mountains are often the place where God reveals God's truth. In just a couple of weeks we will follow Peter and James and John as they go up the mountain with Jesus at the Transfiguration revealing him as the Son of God.

Our scripture today takes place on a mountain. Beginning at the 5th chapter of Matthew's gospel we find Jesus gathered with his disciples and the crowds that had been following them. This is the part of Matthew's gospel that we call the Sermon on the Mount. It begins with what might be called a keynote address: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..."

As Jesus begins his instruction from up on the mountain it becomes clear to those who are gathered that following along Jesus' steps will mean conceiving of the world in a different way. When the time comes for those disciples and that crowd to come down off the mountain, they will be expected to see the world and the people of the world with a different set of eyes.

"Blessed are the merciful; blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are those who are persecuted for my name's sake..." These people that Jesus describes are not the ones the world blesses or honors or protects...and yet for the Church that is Christ's body, they are.

After this list of blessings, Jesus calls his disciples to action. That is where we will pick up our reading for today. So listen with me for the word of God as we find it in the 5th chapter of Matthew's gospel, starting at the 13th verse:

+++

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.

+++

No doubt you know that there are different translations of the Bible. In our church, we use the New Revised Standard Version. That's what is in your pews and it is what is up here on the pulpit. The NRSV is a great translation of the various Hebrew and Greek manuscripts that make up our Old and New Testaments. And the committee of scholars that met over many years, and agonized over the many critical and interpretive decisions that go into translating the Bible were a talented and faithful bunch. But they did have one blind spot. The man who chaired this committee that helped bring NRSV to print was an especially learned and respected scholar named Bruce Metzger. Dr. Metzger was many things: he was a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, he was a Presbyterian, but a Southerner he was not. As such, there is a part of speech that is familiar around these parts which is not reflected in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Today's scripture passage illustrates the point.

From a literal reading of the Greek, what Jesus actually said to his disciples who gathered with him on the mountain was this:

Y'all are the salt of the earth.

Y'all are the light of the world.

And that "y'all" is important – because Jesus isn't giving instructions to a person, he is giving them to a community. The instructions that Jesus gives are meant for all those who overhear them – for all the people in every time and place who comprise the body that is Christ's church.

Y'all are the salt of the earth.

It is an interesting metaphor – salt.

Salt is used for many different purposes.

In Leviticus, salt is used for sacrifice and for offerings.

In Numbers it is used as symbol or reward for covenant faithfulness.

In the first century – "sharing the salt" was a short-handed way to describe table fellowship.

In Second Kings, salt was used for purification.

The book of Job refers to salt as a seasoning.

And over and over and over again, salt is used as a preservative.¹

I'm not sure it is clear in which way Jesus meant for us to be salt, maybe he meant them all – but I am intrigued by this last possibility: that we are called to preserve.

But preserve what?

¹ With thanks to the good work of the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Dallas, Texas (The Well, 2009, Austin).

To preserve the church?
To preserve ourselves?
To preserve our way of doing things?

I need to brag on our staff for a minute. Once a month the program staff gathers to discuss an article that one of selects for the group. Last Tuesday I had all of us read an article written by urban planners that imagined what uptown Charlotte would look like in the year 2058. The question was: if this is the future of Charlotte, what will that mean for our church and our ministry?

We had a generative conversation. If, as projected, there will be 50,000 people living inside the I-277 corridor instead of 15,000, how can we connect these new neighbors who are busy and lonely to a community in Christ where they can grow in faith and in relationship to God and one another? If more and more people use and rely on public transportation, what implications should that have on when we offer classes and worship and programs? If uptown continues to gentrify, how can we respond to the needs of the poor who will be increasingly located outside the I-277 corridor where housing and food are cheaper? What partnerships do we need to build? What services do we need to provide in order that our mission to be “For Christ in the Heart of Charlotte” will continue to apply to all of God’s people?

I’m bragging on your staff because I noticed in our conversation that at no point did the question “how will the church survive?” come up. Instead of worrying about ourselves, the focus of our time together was on how we could live out our calling by tending to the world around us.

Y’all are the salt of the earth.
Y’all are the light of the world.

There is a great line in the Presbyterian Church’s constitution. It says: “The Church is called to undertake [it’s] mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ.”²

Sitting on the mountain, Jesus instructs us to be about the preservation of the world. Not the preservation of ourselves.

The great theologian H. Richard Niehbur said that the essential question of our faith is whether we will choose to live as those who are perishing or as those are being saved.³

² BoO –G-3.0400 (this is the old language...the new BoO has this in F-1.0301 with amended language. I think the old language is stronger and more faithful.

³ I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. Stacy Johnson of Princeton Theological Seminary for his comments about this at the 2012 NEXT Church Conference in Dallas, TX.

It is tempting to live as those who think we are perishing. It's natural. We are conditioned to do it. All of us live in some way under the logic of survival. We want to live, we don't want to die, we don't want our loved ones to die, we don't want our church to die, and we'll do whatever it takes to survive. The logic of survival that lives in fear of death says we are perishing and must protect everything against all possible losses.

But Jesus calls us to another way.

Because we follow the One who was crucified, dead, buried and resurrected, we are called to live as those who are being saved.

That means that we can put aside the fear that leads to self-preservation because our lives are not our own. We are claimed, and loved, and saved, and redeemed by God – but not just for our own sake. The way I talk about it with confirmation classes and new church officers is this – God not only saves us from sin and death, but God saves us for the sake of the world that is blessed by Christ and the people who comprise Christ's body.

Y'all are the salt of the earth.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the world that God came to save.

To believe that the problems that we face in this world are insurmountable.

That nothing that we do will make a dent, much less a difference.

And I guess that is one reason that I am glad Jesus didn't call us the "end all, be all of the earth" or the "last hope of the earth." Instead, Jesus offers us metaphors that make discipleship seem possible: "if you had faith the size of a mustard seed," or "the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in her flour," or, "you are salt, you are light."

There are lots of stories that illustrate what it means to be the salt of the earth.

Soaring examples of things that people have done in the service of God to make this world more like the one God intends it to be.

Sometimes, though, I think those soaring examples of people like Martin Luther King, or Mother Theresa, or Billy Graham don't help us too much when it comes to making discipleship seem possible.

What I find almost more powerful – and more helpful – are the stories that I have heard and seen about the people who I know.

Particularly about people who I have met in church who demonstrate for me what it means to follow Jesus in real world.

I am thinking about the banker who understands that the ministry of her job is to create an office environment where people care for and support one another; where

people feel like people, instead of cogs in a wheel. That takes time – time that might otherwise be spent on trying to get ahead – but it is a priority.

I am thinking about the business owner who takes one of his two weeks of vacation to go on a mission trip to New York to help our sisters and brothers in Christ clean up after Super Storm Sandy.

I think about the high schooler who made the hard choice to stand up to a friend because that friend was bullying someone else in the class.

Or about the stay at home mom who has built a relationship with a family in Westerly Hills.

Or the person in my last congregation who rarely came to church because of her health, but who wrote a letter to the editor once a week bringing her strong faith to bear on what was happening in the world.

The common thread in each of these examples is not simply that people chose let God work through them to make a difference in the world – it is that they chose – in some way – to risk themselves in order that they might be about something greater than themselves.

What will we choose?

Will we live as those who are perishing – who are afraid of the future and who seek after our own preservation?

Or will we live in freedom – as those who are being saved?

This morning there will be about 700 people who come through our doors. There are thousands more who join us on television and the internet.

And we are just one church!

Y'all are the salt of the earth.

Y'all are the light of the world.

May we be so.

Amen.