

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 12, 2017
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Habakkuk 3:1-17
Psalm 27:1-7
I Corinthians 2:1-11
Matthew 5:13-20

Last week you may recall that our Gospel lesson had Jesus climbing up the mountain where he sat down to teach the crowds and his disciples. Launching into his well known “Sermon on the Mount,” he began with the *beatitudes*, a series of blessings pronounced on those who mourn, those whose hearts are pure, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are meek and poor in spirit.

Then shifting focus a bit, Jesus also pronounces blessing on his followers when they are slandered, insulted, and persecuted because of their relationship with him.

One primary lesson we may take from this is that “blessedness” or being blessed is not so much about the favor and approval of God when life is good and we are on the mountain top – rather, *true blessedness is about the presence of God with us in the midst of our brokenness, pain, and vulnerability.*

When I was younger, I remember a couple of times when I accompanied my stepfather to his job. Some schools now even have a program, a sort of “go to work with your parent” day. Well, if you were to join up with Jesus and follow him to work on any given day, I can assure you that you would find yourself

among broken, hurting, grieving, people. You would find yourself among the “underbelly” of society. If you don’t believe that, read your New Testament and pay attention to the kind of people Jesus sought out during the course of his short ministry.

But in today’s Gospel, the pronouncement of blessing shifts from people in general to a more specific location. Speaking to his disciples, Jesus says: “You are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world.”

Note again that these are *not* commands; they are *promises*. However you want to torture these metaphors of salt and light, Jesus is clear that his disciples do not aspire to be salt and light; they *already are salt and light in the world*. This is a statement of *blessing*, not a command to aspire to something.

If I asked you right now to recount in your mind your activities of this past week, you would likely discover that there were occasions where you were salt and light to someone. Recall your conversations, your activities, your encounters. If you think about it, you will likely realize that God was using you to be salt and light in one of those situations, perhaps without you even realizing it at the time.

Salt and light. Not something toward which we aspire, but something we already are. Jesus then says: “Let your light so shine before men that they may seek your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

In other words: *Be what you are.* “You’ve been blessed,” says Jesus. “Now live your lives to bless others. Be what you are.”

Jesus does not pronounce blessing on his disciples merely for themselves alone. They are never blessed merely for their own benefit.

And what about you? If the power and presence of God is at work in your life, is that blessing meant to stop with you? Or is it possible that other lives could benefit from what God is doing in yours?

Think for a moment: What might happen if the blessing of God in our lives would go “viral”? What might that look like?

Well, according to Jesus, *that’s exactly what has happened.*

God’s blessing on the church and on our lives was never designed to remain our own personal, private possession. Remember God’s calling of Israel in the Old Testament? God called Abraham, and from Abraham fashioned a people unto Himself. And God did this not just because He loved the children of Israel, but because “all the families of the earth were to be blessed” through them.

The blessing of the Creator God is meant to “go viral” in our world. But because Jesus came along before the advent of computers, tablets, cell phones, and *YouTube*, he phrases this truth a bit differently. In first century parlance, Jesus’ way of saying that the blessing of God is to turn outward and “go viral” is this:

you are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your Heavenly Father.

In the context of this passage, it seems clear that one of the ways we are to function as salt and light has to do with our stewardship of the sacred Scriptures. Jesus placed himself in direct continuity with Moses and the prophetic tradition, whose teachings formed the Scriptures of his day.

It seems equally clear that Jesus came *not* to lead people away from Scripture but to help them to take it seriously. Jesus is *the* interpreter of Scripture. He is the chief scribe and teacher.

And for the church to function as salt and light, we must continually scrutinize our interpretation and stewardship of Scripture, so that in our handling of the *letter* of the law we do not violate its *spirit*. We must constantly be vigilant, lest in our preaching of *Scripture* we do violence to the *Gospel*.

Take, for instance, Jesus' comments about the need for our righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Is Jesus opening the door here to a "hyper-legalism," a legalism of the worst kind where every "i" must be dotted and every "t" must be crossed, in strict fashion? A legalism that makes no attempt to discern weightier matters from lesser ones? A legalism that must be enforced at the expense of love?

I don't believe so. What Jesus is doing here is using and affirming the tradition of the Scriptures *in order to challenge interpretations of those Scriptures that violated their intent.*

An example of this comes later in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus confronts the Pharisees about tithing. The Pharisees were preoccupied with the external act of tithing. It was for them a very legalistic act. But Jesus tells them that they ought to be concerned about the foundational things that prompt tithing, like justice and mercy and faith. (Cf. Mt. 23:23) The purpose of the tithe is not because God is an Oger who demands 10% of your income. The tithe exists because the blessing of God is on us, and God desires that blessing to go viral in our world.

The Pharisees were teaching their own Scriptures in a way that violated the very spirit and intent of those sacred texts. Jesus challenges that, not by abolishing the Scriptures, but by *filling them full* of their original intent.

The church of today is engaged in the same process, because we do our ministry in continuity with the tradition of Moses and the prophets and the Scriptures Jesus affirmed. One of the key ways we function as salt and light in the world is in how we steward and interpret the Scriptures that have been given to us.

And here is where it gets hard: *Followers of Jesus don't always agree on what exactly being salt and light looks like.*

I may have strong opinions about what it means to be salt and light. Others may have opinions that are very different than mine. And the difficulty arises when some of the people who feel very differently than I do are people I know well and love. Family members, colleagues, parishioners. And if I am not careful, I find it hard to reject their opinions without rejecting *them*.

We live in stressful and tumultuous times. Times where salt and light are desperately needed. But the fact is that God is already providing that salt and light – in each of you! Maybe it would be a good thing if you took a moment to remind the people seated behind you and in front of you that God is using them to bless others and to fulfill His promises.

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, we do so with the awareness that Jesus' followers sometimes struggle to agree on what it looks like to be salt and light. And so we seek God's grace, and we pray for wisdom and humility, that we might have the courage to continue to live our faith, and to live for one another.

So come with faith. Receive the grace he offers you in the bread and wine. Then go forth to be the blessing of God to others.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.