

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 5: 13-20

Our scripture continues from last week where Jesus pronounced blessings upon the gathered crowd, blessing people who had long been called unclean and unholy and less than. They were the poor, down-trodden, meek, mournful, yearning crowd. They were gentiles and women. Like a good preacher, he is not just speaking general truths, but speaking to those before him, interpreting and applying the tradition to his context. And so, our gospel reading continues in the same vein, Jesus speaking to this band of people not as outcasts, but as his followers, as those most likely to understand and invest in the Kingdom of God, of which Jesus speaks.

Now why does one reinterpret scripture or tradition? Aren't these supposed to be set? Meaning is stable, truth to be defended and preserved, isn't it? Well, in Jewish tradition interpretation and reinterpretation is part of the tradition, sitting around and debating the meaning of the text, sparring over it. The presumption underlying this tradition is that through this questioning and argumentation, and exploration, we get closer to the meaning of the text. So, therefore Jesus is not actually outside from the tradition, though his teachings certainly veer from the normal strain of teachings.

There are other times we reinterpret. When our cultural moment or cultural context raises questions that were not asked or answered prior, or that old answers don't fit any more, or that through various changes, we see things differently, have a new perspective. As John Kullman has been teaching in Sunday School, there are seasons that the Spirit leads in a new way, and we are called to respond. We also may reinterpret when the dynamics at power have calcified the tradition for the preserving of things that need revisiting, when the dynamics of power preserve a system that serves those with power and privilege better than it serves others.

For all these reasons, Jesus is reinterpreting and proclaiming a kingdom of God, inviting his listeners to imagine a reality shaped by God's purposes, purposes that will find a fulfillment through Jesus' own life, death, and resurrection. And he is inviting his listeners that are gathered on the hillside to imagine themselves as key participants in this new kingdom, this new thing the Spirit is doing.

So, when Jesus speaks the words of our reading this morning, it has a contextualized feel. He is not just speaking generalized words; he is speaking to

those people gathered there on the hillside. For right before Jesus begins his teaching, we are told. “They brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”

Like a personal address, like a sermon crafted to the crowd before him rather than just general words. You are the salt of the earth. You are light of the world.

I imagine it was a mixed crowd—the healthy carrying the sick, parents bringing their epileptic children and so on. It was a crowd that had seen difficulty. There were weary, exhausted, frustrated, like having taken your loved one to a thousand doctors and still no answers. To use the writer Brennan Manning’s term, they were “ragamuffins.” This was Jesus’ crowd. These were the ones who Jesus spoke of with such hope. I don’t know what he saw or sensed in them either, or what gave him such confidence. “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.”

The light of the world was not a new expression. But Jesus re-appropriates it. In Jewish tradition, this expression was used mainly for Jerusalem—the great holy city, home of the temple, the symbol and center of God’s presence and plans of peace and prosperity for his people. Jerusalem was the city set upon a hill providing light and hope that might go out to the world. The great beacon. It was the vision that Jerusalem would be the emblem of the law perfectly performed, and of worship beautifully executed. A symbol and sign of God’s kingdom, and of God’s blessing. It was a type of trickle-down theology, if you will – God’s blessing on Jerusalem, that would then slowly make its way out to the ends of the world.

The preacher John Winthrop appropriated this language for America and the new world in 1630, calling the people settling in Massachusetts that great city on a hill giving light to the world. This appropriation has stuck over time, seeing America is the great city set upon the hill, an example and a beacon of hope for the world, through America, God’s will would be performed.

But nonetheless, Jesus takes and adapts this weighty expression. He does not lift up Jerusalem or the Jewish people generally or the Torah as symbols of light and hope to the world. Instead, he looks into the eyes of these fishermen, tax collectors, women of ill repute, and those whom the law had long excluded, like the blind and the lame and the epileptic. To these, he says: you are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth.

Jesus sees something in them. For one, I think he sees hurting and yearning people who might experience God's healing and grace and be warmed with gratitude and prone to seek this kingdom of God. Two, they might be more prone to live out faith in acts of love and grace to one another, rather than preoccupation with law and custom. Three, this gathering out in the hillsides of Galilee is something of a grassroots movement. Rather than trying to bring change from the top, by changing the customs and teachings coming from the scribes and pharisees, he is creating change on the edges, by helping those who have fallen through the cracks.

You see, law and tradition get entrenched in different ways. It becomes set, cold, calcified. Keeping it fresh and alive is not an easy task, nor updating and applying to new contexts and situations. We hear this in our Isaiah passage. We hear a sharp critique of temple worship because it had lost its spirit, heart, and connection to relationships and community, love and justice. Isaiah critiques to the point of saying God has no interest in your worship. It has become all about you, not God nor love and justice. And so Isaiah directs them back to the foundational roots of community and justice and care and love.

As I said last week, something we sometimes miss about the nature of the Bible is that it is arguing with itself. You see, we sometimes talk of the Bible like it is a systematic work that says the same thing from start to finish, that it is consistent and coherent as a whole. The Bible, however, is, much of the time, dialoguing and debating with itself. It is dealing with its own tradition in changing contexts and new crises, reapplying, reinterpreting.

In that vein, Isaiah provides some harsh critique, as does Jesus. Jesus says, yes, you religious types have preserved the tradition with great care. You carry on the sacrifices with precision. But you do not actually grasp the heart of things. So, the tradition must be updated, must be interpreted afresh, must be put into the hands of those who will respond with heart and with love. "I have not come to abolish the law," Jesus says, "but to fulfil it," to extract the heart of it once again. So, he says to the crowd, your righteousness, meaning what is right before God, what God requires or desires of you; also, what it means to be in right relationship with others - this must exceed, go beyond, transcend, that of the scribes and the Pharisees. They know their Torah chapter and verse. They preserve the tradition, protect the purity of it, but that is not enough.

Rather, to this crowd gathered on a Galilean hillside, he sees hope and the emergence of the kingdom in hearts. These who have known hurt and been excluded and who yearn for a better day, these are the light of the world. These are the salt of the earth.

I think of the lines from the poem this morning:

We look with uncertainty
beyond the old choices for
clear-cut answers
to a softer, more permeable aliveness

The renewal of faith, the refreshing of what it means to be in right relationship with God and with one another. An aliveness in our hearts, a willingness to follow, a softness of heart, a swelling of gratitude.

Now, in effort not to be too romantic and generalize too much, it is not like all on that hillside are without any negative potential and that all religious leaders of the time are stoic creeps. But we generalize and hyperbolize when we are trying to make points or garnish change. In reality, many who suffer hard things become bitter, cold, harsh, rather than open and kind and generous. It is not a guarantee. And it not that all who are ensconced in the tradition can't change – consider Nicodemus, one who does seem to be born anew.

And in each of us, we hold these potentials. We hold the potential of the religious leaders, to be over-confident in what we know, to be stuck in our traditions and ways of doing things, to be obtuse to those who are not being served or cared for well, or who have not had the same voice. And we each of also hold the potential to be that salt of the earth and light of the world, to embody love and community and justice in our relationships, to sense and follow the Spirit, to be transformed by God's forgiveness and grace and to live from a place of gratitude.

Isaiah's words are set between 600 and 500 BC, in the years of exile and post-exile. God says through Isaiah, learn from the mistakes of your ancestors who thought their relationship with God was all about sacrifices and temple. So, as you rebuild, care for one another. Show love, learn justice, build community, practice compassion.

Jesus' words in Matthew 5 come when Rome holds power. The religious leaders in Jerusalem make deals with Rome so that they can preserve worship at the temple, and line their coffers with funds to keep the temple going. But Jesus sees the heart of the tradition not found in the temple, but on the edges, in the faces of these people on the hillside. Jesus sees the heart of the law, the spirit of the law, emerging in them who might experience grace and live out of that place of grace.

And what about us, in a time when the church doesn't have the power and acclaim it once did, when people have abandoned the Christian faith in droves, God's spirit speaks once again – renew the foundation of love and justice and care and compassion, renew your encounter with grace and the power of God, renew your gratitude, renew your openness to God's leading. Because you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world, you are the ones who must embody righteousness again.

And all God's people said...

Salt and Light

(Mk 9:50; Lk 14:34–35)

¹³“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.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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.

The Law and the Prophets

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹Therefore, 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. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.