

When I first looked at the gospel reading for today, I thought, “Well, this will be an easy sermon to write.” I thought that because the two main ideas in this reading, salt of the earth and light of the world, are so commonly understood. But I discovered that, as with most phrases that are commonly understood, their true meaning depends on the context that surrounds them. The context, it turns out, is complicated in this case. As a result it was a really challenging sermon to write. It may also be a challenging one to hear. Bear with me, though. As with many of life’s challenges, they tend to be worth it in the end. Let’s take this challenge on by going step by step.

In the modern day, when we refer to someone as being a “salt of the earth” kind of person we mean that person is a good, reliable, trustworthy sort of person. That could be one way of interpreting Jesus’s words. But we need to consider what was happening at the time the gospel text was written in order to really get at what Jesus meant.

In this story, Jesus had just ascended a mount with his disciples. They were followed by a crowd of thousands who were expecting to be taught and to be healed. In placing Jesus at the top of a mount, Matthew is making a thinly veiled comparison between Jesus and Moses. This

comparison was vital for Matthew whose audience was primarily Jewish. They credited Moses with receiving and conveying God's law to them. They understood God's law to be rules established by God in order to define, sustain and protect their relationship with God and each other. We know that law as The Commandments. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus sat down to teach. Sitting to teach was the traditional posture of first century Jewish rabbis. Ascending the mount, sitting to teach would have authenticated Jesus's ministry for Matthew's hearers.

When Jesus addressed the disciples that day in his sermon from on top of the mount, he used the plural form of the second person. He was addressing the entire group as one community. Jesus said to them all, "You are the salt of the earth." Salt is a seasoning that enhances the flavor of the foods around it. And he didn't stop there. He followed that by saying, "You," meaning ALL of you, "are the light of the world."

Think about *that* for a minute. It's daunting enough to think of "you" singular being that significant, but to think of "you" plural is truly hard to get one's head around. I mean, I can trust myself to know myself well enough to follow God's call on my life. Even then, I'm not perfect. I make mistakes, I transgress, I repent, but I try. But can I trust that others will do the same?

Will they take seriously the impact they will have on others? Do they care that by their actions they will plant seeds in others? How many of us really understands how much what we do or say affects another person?

I think each of us understands who Jesus was. I think we understand that Jesus is, was and will always be the salt that God sent to the earth to inspire the best to arise from us; the best to arise from us as individuals and together. And I think we can also agree that Jesus is, was and will always be the light of the world. When the Christ light shines we can see defined before us all that God created us to be, both individually and collectively. When Jesus declares that You, meaning We, are the salt and the light he is saying that whatever is in him is also in us. He is saying that we need to own that and claim that. We need to manifest the Jesus-ness in us all as a church, as the body of Christ in the world. We need to be more than place holders for Jesus when he returns to set things ultimately right. The kingdom of God is at hand...but not yet realized.

Do we really want it? Do we really want the kingdom of God to be realized in our midst? To borrow a phrase from Martin Luther King, Jr., do humans really have the time, the heart and the capacity to bend the arc of history toward justice? I believe we do and I believe we can with God's

help. Reaction to recent political decisions here in America suggests that not everyone in our society believes that we are bending the arc toward justice.

The political confusion and stark division in this nation has been upsetting no matter which side of the political spectrum you tend to agree with. Although the chaos that has erupted had been lurking under the surface for a while, the election in November brought the ugliness out in full relief. Instead of salt, there seems to be a lot of intensely hot pepper in our relationships these days. Prayer can and will help us individually and collectively to cool down the heat. As Walter Bruggemann says we need to intentionally disengage from anxiety. Disengaging begins with genuine Sabbath. The church, Bruggemann says, can show the world in visible ways how to live out an alternative way of life by modeling a true day of rest; withdrawing from the perceived need to fill every single waking hour of our lives with productivity and consumption.

The alternative way to live that Brueggemann promotes is the way described to us in the gospels by Jesus. That way incorporates three components. They are: Hospitality, Generosity and Forgiveness. Sounds simple, doesn't it? But hospitality is more than shaking hands during the

peace. The kind of radical hospitality that Jesus lived included everyone, invited everyone, welcomed everyone. That's hard! Generosity is easier if it means writing a check. But I don't think that's all of what Jesus meant. It means providing room when you think there isn't any, it means taking care of someone when you're already late for a meeting. It means using your lunch hour to be a mentor to a child in need. It means taking steps to care for our planet Earth - recycling, using energy responsibly. It's hard! I've never met anyone who thinks forgiveness is easy. Brueggemann defines it as "breaking cycles of vengeance;" breaking out of the "you hurt me so I'm gonna hurt you" cycle of hate. Have you ever truly forgiven someone? Have you ever been truly forgiven *by* someone? It's hard but it is so healing and restorative.

The church is in a uniquely qualified position to make a difference in society right now. But can the church overcome it's own divisions in order to claim that role?

At the end of the reading this morning, Jesus says "whoever does and teaches these commandments 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." This is

our call, folks! The church is that institution that teaches these commandments. And yet, in the course of that we transgress them, too. By bickering and arguing over jots and tittles, disagreements over interpretations and whose more righteous than whom, we miss our great calling. Our great calling is to be the gospel, to manifest the gospel life. When Jesus compared the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and his disciples, he was talking about quality of a life lived in relationship not the checklist of laws one has complied with.

So how's our quality of life? Are we living a life of quality relationship with God and each other as defined in the gospels? I know we are trying to do that. But I also know from news reports and social media that there is a lot of work in this world that needs to be done in regard to relationship. With God's help and blessing, the church, and maybe even us at St. John's, can play a role in the world's healing. With God's help and blessing may that healing begin with us here today.