

“You Are Ordinary” Rev. Michele Ward
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church
February 9, 2020 Fifth Sunday After Epiphany Matthew 5:13-20

Trouble in the Text

The gospel writer Matthew lived in a time of deep religious and political tension. Biblical historians place the writing of Matthew’s gospel around the time the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. Matthew’s community was in active conflict about what it meant to be Jewish without the temple and what the future of Judaism would look like.¹

Jesus proclaimed his famous Sermon on the Mount in the midst of a heated time. This was not meant to be a playbook to memorize or a list of traits to comfort his listeners. Jesus delivered this message in order to course correct the debate about the direction that God was telling Israel to take politically and religiously.

Jesus’ context: the Roman Empire still occupies Israel, and the Jewish people have lived under foreign rule since the Babylonian exile started in the 5th Century BCE. They are accustomed to others calling the shots and regulating their lives. Sure, the Jewish people rebuilt the temple under the Persian empire and moved back to their ancestral home, but they did not return independently. They returned with the permission of King Xerxes and now worship their God at the pleasure of the Roman Empire.

The Jewish community was wracked with questions: How can it be that Jerusalem is God’s holy city and the home of the temple when they are both occupied by Gentile rulers? Does God want us to do anything about that? And if God does, what does God want us to do?

On one side of the debate over the future of Israel were the religious zealots who wanted to train a Jewish military and fight back. On another side were the Saducees who wanted to collaborate with the Roman Empire and compromise with the powers that be. One yet another side were the Pharisees, which were divided between the military ambitions of the zealots and the lure of going inward. They encouraged many people to study Torah and to preserve Jewish culture. Their reasoning was that the Jewish community could never match the Roman Empire in its military strength, so it was a lost cause to attempt to seize control of Judea.²

Trouble Today

¹ Ronald Allen, *Feasting on the Word*, Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Homiletical Perspective, 333.

² N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 185-95.

Like Matthew, we live in a time of religious and political tension. Divides between various groups seem to increase rather than decrease. We tend to have relationships with people who only think or act in ways that make us comfortable or validate our opinions. We replace curiosity for someone else's perspective with one dimensional labels, writing them off before they have the opportunity to express their thoughts. We identify ourselves or others as progressive or traditional, liberal or conservative, moderate or indecisive.

The era of Christendom as a social force in politics and communities continues to decrease. According to the most recent "Religious Landscape Study" by the Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life, 17% of Marylanders identify as mainline Protestant, which includes Presbyterians of every stripe. 23% of Marylanders identify as nonreligious.³ Mainline denominations like ours do not have as much social clout as they once did, and public opinion about Christianity is general is more negative than positive.

A major distinction I would be remiss to ignore is the one of the colonized versus the colonizer. Unlike the Jewish audience of Matthew's gospel, most of us in this room today are not the ancestors of the first people to inhabit this land. Most of us in this room today do not know what it is like to live in occupied territory or be forcibly brought here on slave ships. Some of us do. Some of us relate to the oppression and struggle for liberation of the Jewish people. Others of us relate more to the Roman Empire and its colonization of Judea, the product of centuries of occupation, slavery, and immigration. Wherever you find yourself in the context of this passage, God has room for you to encounter something holy and something real this morning.

So in light of this broader context, the Christian community is also wracked with questions: What does it mean to be followers of Jesus Christ in this political and religious landscape? How is Jesus commanding us to live?

Good News in the Text

Jesus lays out provocative answers to these questions in this segment of the Sermon on the Mount. He starts out by telling his audience to live out their identity as the nation of Israel. He tells them that they are salt. This metaphor is based on a long religious tradition that values salt. According to Mark Kurlansky, in his book *Salt: A World History*, "Salt was to the ancient Hebrews, and still is to modern Jews, the symbol of the eternal nature of God's covenant with Israel."⁴ Salt flavors and preserves food, purifies meat by removing blood,

³ "Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/maryland/religious-tradition/mainline-protestant/>

⁴ Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Penguin, 2002), Introduction.

which was a Torah requirement before consuming it, cleanses, and heals. First century Palestinian Jews would have known these common uses for salt, and it is most likely that these reasons led to salt's uses in temple sacrifices and offerings.⁵

This symbol of God's promise makes its way into the Sermon on the Mount because of its importance. Matthew believed that the apocalypse would come soon and his faith community might live to see it. For him, reminding his audience of their essence mattered deeply. Maintaining their essence as salt--as a powerful, ordinary, life sustaining property--meant maintaining their connection to God at whatever the cost to their personal lives.

Jesus also tells them that they are light, another highly valuable commodity in the ancient world. The prophet Isaiah 42:6 uses this metaphor: "You are the light of the world." Without sunlight, crops will not grow, animals will not thrive, people will not find their way during the day or night. Lights are meant to illuminate or make brighter whatever else surrounds them. Jesus tells them they are essential. They are ordinary elements, salt and light, and yet critical to the Jesus movement. They must continue to be exactly who God made them to be. Salt and light. Flavorful and bright. Covenant keepers and truth bearers.

Good News for Today

The good news for us today is that each and every one of us is ordinary salt and light. Each of us is as ordinary as a tiny grain of salt or as numerous as a ray of light. And yet, that does not diminish our importance. In fact, it elevates it. You see, one grain of salt can't do much to flavor anything. And yet together, with many other grains of salt, salt is powerful. Salt can do more together than it can do alone.

In the earlier section of this chapter in Matthew, Jesus tells the depressed, the grieving, the hungry, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the justices seekers that they are blessed. Now he is telling these very people how ordinary and necessary they are.

And he is telling us the same thing, too.

I grieved and wrestled this week, church. I wrestled with how to get up here and preach on how change is possible because God declares us blessed and powerful beyond our understanding. I grieved over yet again another news cycle week that makes me feel more despair the longer this presidency continues. And I wrestled. I wrestled with how to get up here and deliver a good

⁵ Rev. Dr. Amy Lindeman Allen, "The Politics of Saltiness," The Politics of Scripture Section, *Political Theology*, January 30, 2017. Accessed February 6, 2020. <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-saltiness-matthew-513-20-amy-allen/>

word to you. What is a good word in the midst of all this mess in Washington and in Baltimore?

A good word is the one that Jesus brings to his audience in Matthew 5, and he brings it for us this morning, too. We are salt - we are absolutely vital. We are light - we are unmistakably bright.

Jesus tells people who do not feel vital or bright how necessary and ordinary they are. The ones who feel alone. The ones who feel lost. The ones who feel uncertain about the future. The ones who have compassion fatigue. The ones who are close to burnout. The ones who are overwhelmed with anxiety. The ones who watch the same news as everyone else.

We are ordinary. We are essential. We are necessary. Jesus declared it so.

Annie Dillard says in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, "You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary."⁶

So go and shine your light in this dark time, church. Go and look for those stars in the dark sky.

Be ordinary, as Jesus himself was ordinary. Amen.

Benediction

"Salt" by Steve Garnass Holmes⁷

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?"

1 Corinthians 2:12

Your salt is kindness.
Let all you do be salted with love.

Don't leave your faith unsalted.
Don't lose your love for anything else.

Be the salt of every moment,
releasing the flavor of grace.

Let love be what preserves,

⁶ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 43.

⁷ Reverend Steve Garnass Holmes, *Unfolding Light Daily Reflection*, <http://www.unfoldinglight.net>. Accessed February 6, 2020.

what honors, what keeps.

Honor the grit of your salt,
the courage to seek justice.

Let the salt of your mercy
melt the ice of injustice.

Let your prayer be an epsom salt bath
in the kindness of God.