

Matthew 5: 13-20 “Bearers of Light”

Rev. Janet Chapman 2/5/17

I saw the movie “A Dog’s Purpose” this past week, and cried through most of it. You need to know that I am not a big crier at movies, unlike the rest of my family. But there was just something about this movie that got me. So, of course, I had to try and figure out what it was – it wasn’t necessarily that the dog kept dying and leaving behind grieving owners, nor was it the fact that the dog was so honest and good in its intentions you couldn’t help but love it. I finally came to the realization that I was drawn to the dog’s journey to discover why it existed on earth – that age-old question of why we are here on earth, played out in the mind of a dog, caught my imagination, and apparently, my heart. I am aware that in times of unrest and upheaval, we are often drawn to that question as we attempt to find meaning for what we are experiencing. Jimmy Kimmel, in his segment called Lie Witness News, where reporters go out and ask bystanders questions which are obviously false, revealed this phenomena last week. A reporter asked folks what they thought of the new Supreme Court Justice pick of Rob Kardashian to fill the vacant seat, obviously trying to trick them and see if they pick up on the lie. Sadly, many did not, and one young lady even responded, “Well, I am not particularly happy about it because of his celebrity status, but my philosophy is that it will all work out for the best.” She apparently had found her purpose in life, and it is not necessarily connected to factual events. I remember a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip where Calvin is at school and his teacher is attempting to teach the class. The teacher asks, “If there are no other questions, then we’ll move on to the next chapter.” “I have a question,” says Calvin. The teacher turns to him, “Certainly, what is it?” “What’s the point of human existence?” he asks. The teacher responds, “I meant any questions about the subject at hand.” To which Calvin says, “Frankly, I’d like to have this issue resolved before I expend any more energy on anything else.” Wouldn’t we all, honestly?

So Jesus, as the classic authoritative teacher, gathers his disciples and begins to teach, with an awareness that this is a human need which knows no generation. The “Sermon on the Mount,” which we started exploring last Sunday, is Jesus’ masterpiece. In it, readers can find

most of the significant themes relevant to the remainder of Matthew's story about Jesus. In the few verses we have today, Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." First of all, the way Jesus phrases these memorable lines tells us something important about him. Like all great leaders, he isn't preoccupied with himself – it isn't all about him. And if there is anyone on earth who certainly had earned the right to be narcissistic, to make it all about him, it would be Jesus, don't you think? But no, Jesus puts others, he puts us in the spotlight when he says, "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world." Yes, there is a place and time for him to declare who he is, what his purpose is on earth, but he begins this sermon by declaring who we are. The people gathered are hanging on Jesus' every word. They can tell something profound and life-changing is happening within and among them. Jesus is not simply trying to restore their religion to some ideal state in the past. Nor is he agitating unrest to start a new religion to compare with the old one (a common misconception of our time when we compare Christianity with Judaism – Jesus had no intent to start a new faith). No, says Brian McLaren, it is abundantly clear that Jesus is here to start something bigger, deeper, and more subversive: a global uprising that can spread to and through every religion and culture. And this uprising begins not with a new strategy but with a new identity. So he spurs his hearers into reflection about who they are, who they want to be, what kind of people they will become, and what they want to make of their lives. He addresses their purpose on earth. You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.

Notice the present tense of the verbs in these statements – they are not attributes to be attained somewhere off in the future, but about who we are, what our new lives look like in this new existence called the Kingdom or Realm of God. Using these metaphors, we are salty or tasty; we are lit up and aglow. Those who follow Jesus don't merely sit back and receive abundant life, or simply tell others about what a great abundant life they have, they make a difference for others in the world. We are the tastiness that adds salt to lives around us. We are light that makes plain the ways of justice and righteousness found in the realm of God. Salt and light are precious commodities both in Jesus' time and our own for both sustain life and are not produced easily on one's own. They are gifts of creation that require careful ingenuity to

access and conserve and neither salt nor light exists for themselves. They only fulfill their purpose when used, when poured out.

As some of you know, the natural element of salt is used in sacred circles as a symbol of healing, wholeness and well-being. In some Christian traditions, salt is placed in an infant's mouth to draw out wisdom during baptism. In Jewish traditions, bread is dipped in salt on Friday nights to symbolize the preserving of the promise between God and God's people. In every instance that Jesus uses the imagery of salt, he is painting a picture of how he hopes his followers would act and be in the world. The value of salt is only realized in its application to and relationship with other things. So, likewise, the followers of Jesus are called to exist for others. Yet, Jesus warns that salt may become literally foolish, that is, losing its taste or value. It may become indistinguishable from the elements around it, void of any action which reveals its true identity. In the famous film, *The Graduate*, Dustin Hoffman plays the role of a young man who has just finished his college career and is ready to move into the world of business. He is seduced by the infamous Mrs. Robinson, a name that has now taken on a life of its own in our society. As he is lying in bed with this older woman, he tries to engage her in meaningful conversation. He tries to tell her about the great painters he learned about while at the university, but she is bored with it all. He then asks Mrs. Robinson what she majored in when she was in college. "Art," she answers. It becomes obvious she lost her zest for life, for what had given her life meaning in younger years. Life had become so watered down that her actions, her interests and thoughts no longer reflected her true identity. Just as salt loses its potency and consistency over time, so we too can become disconnected from our very selves. There will be moments in our lives where we will be tempted, no doubt, to let ourselves be tamed, toned down, shut up or glossed over. But Jesus means for us to stand apart from the status quo, to stand up for what matters, and to stand out as part of the solution rather than part of the problem. He means for our lives to overcome the blandness and reclaim our potency with the generous flavoring of good works. Instead of drawing attention to ourselves, therefore, these good works will point toward God. And people will say, "Wow, when I experience the goodness and kindness of your life, I can believe there is a good and kind God out there as well." You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world.

Living in a post Thomas Edison world, light has taken on a whole different connotation than it did in Jesus' time. In that time, people were at the mercy of wherever the sun happened to be but we live in relative control of light, able to create it with the flick of a switch. Even more so than salt, light is basic to human existence and meaning. Former President Borja of Ecuador tells a story of being arrested during Ecuador's struggle for democracy. Without trial, he was thrown into a cold dungeon with no light or window. For 3 days, he endured the solitary fear and darkness that can drive a person mad. Just when the situations seemed unbearable, the huge steel door opened, and someone crept into the darkness. Borja heard the person working on something in the opposite corner. Then the figure crept out, closed the door, and disappeared. Minutes later the room suddenly blazed with light. Someone, perhaps taking his life into his own hands, had connected electricity to the broken light fixture. "From that moment," Borja explained, "my imprisonment had meaning because at least I could see."

Jesus takes this imagery of being without light and compares it to a bushel covering a lamp. The "bushel" is not a unit of measurement as some might assume but a vessel large enough to cover a lamp. Therefore, it is a light which is not snuffed out, as we sang about earlier in the first song, but it is a light which is covered up. The light isn't extinguished but it is rendered ineffective, which begs the question, "What in our lives is operating like that bushel? What is covering up our inner light, that light with which we have all been born? What is making our light ineffective?" For some, it may be a sense of inferiority, a lack of confidence that comes from chronically comparing ourselves to others. For others, it may be a fear of the future, a fear of that which is out of our control or maybe worse, that which is within our control but we simply can't seem to act upon. For many, that bushel is a default setting that we always seem to go back to which leans toward comfort, conformity, and complacency when what Jesus really needs from us is to be the salt and the light – the salt that just might sting a bit when applied and the light that just might expose what we do not want to see. Bushels can become our very identity to which we cling for dear life, unwilling to let them go. Jesus calls us out on this, seeking to unmask our bushes for the human failures they are, and reminding us that those who follow his ways do not give over their energy, time or power to things that block the light. There are real life forces operating just like "Lie Witness News" in our world speaking

falsehoods about our identities, claiming that we are not sober enough or church-going enough or Christian enough or Bible spouting enough to be claimed by God. In contrast, Jesus speaks a new message telling us that the Realm of God is open to everyone, regardless of who is righteous or deserving, and there we shall live our true identity. As we consider Jesus' message, we know deep inside that if we reclaim this identity, this purpose, everything will change not just for us but for the world. So let us spread that good news not just with words but, more importantly, with actions. Eugene Peterson summarizes it all by saying, "Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. (God says) 'We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God...'" So be it – Amen.