

**Matthew 5: 13-20 “The Contrast Society” 2/8/26 Rev. Janet Chapman**

**I got to see a bit of the Opening Ceremony for the Olympics Friday night and really enjoyed it, particularly the large paint tubes floating in the sky with the illusion of paint flowing out of them, plus the choreographed representation of the universe and planets incorporating the first female space shuttle commander, Eileen Collins. I still remember when Mikayla was a young child, helping her create a scaled model of the planets rotating around the sun for her science project. In that vein, a teacher once asked his 6<sup>th</sup> grade class, “Which is more important to us – the moon or the sun?” One student answered, “The moon.” The teacher asked, “Why?” The student explained, “Because the moon gives us light at night when we need it most... The sun just gives us light in the daytime when we really don’t need it.” And that is one of the reasons we still desperately need our teachers. Distinctions between the sun and moon for that young man, much like distinctions between church and state in our society, have become sorely blurred and misunderstood.**

**Whenever I hear someone say, “This is a Christian nation and must be led by Christians,” I respond that was never the intention of our founders. The USA was established because of a desire for freedom of religion, not with an adherence to one over the other. If we wanted the latter, we should have remained with the Church of England who readily blended church and state. The church’s history has included times and places where that situation was played out to the extremes, where everyone answered to both the church and the state, since everyone was both inevitably citizen and Christian. The job of the church was to honor and sanctify the state, even as the state insured the preeminent status of the church and favored it with special privileges. In such a context, the church easily adopted the worldly values of the state and therefore embraced and defended violence, war, and materialism. Likewise, the church paid homage to the rich and powerful and, for the most part, had little time for those Jesus called, “the least of these.” Whenever the government or its leaders bestow favor on the church, the church quite naturally feels it owes something to the empire or government in return. Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most esteemed preachers nationwide, told a story about going**

with the Phillips Seminary President based in Enid, OK, to visit a potential donor, an Oklahoma oil man, looking to drop some serious money on teaching seminary students to effectively lead the church into the new century. After hearing about Phillips' program, he took out his pen to sign a very large check to the seminary. Just before signing his name, he looked up and said, "Now, this all goes for the preaching program?" "Yes sir," said the President, "that's what it will go for." He started to write then stopped again. "And you do understand, none of this is to go to women or blacks, right?" The President slowly stood up and Craddock followed suit. The President responded, "I'm sorry, sir, we can't accept your money on those conditions." They started to leave. The man said, "Well, there are plenty of seminaries that will." Craddock wanted to stay and talk about it, but it was all over. The Seminary President and Craddock were silent all the way home. That man had given to schools and churches over \$60 million dollars, which would be like \$100 mil these days, but not a penny was to go to women or blacks, you understand?

When the church caves to the values of society, it loses its flavor, its light, its distinction in contrast to the world in which it exists. There is no discernible difference. Our scripture today is about maintaining the light and flavor of the realm of God in contrast to those values which directly contradict God's priorities. Former President Borja of Ecuador tells a story of being imprisoned by the military when he was advocating for democracy in his homeland. Without a trial, he was thrown into a cold dungeon with no light or window. For three days, he endured the solitary fear and darkness that can drive a person mad. Just when it 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."

Chaos and fear thrive in the dark. Spreading light, being light is desperately needed in our darkness right now. Providing contrast, as salt does to food, is vitally essential when our society grows apathetic and stale to the needs of its most vulnerable citizens. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is just as relevant today as it ever was. Being a radiant city on a hill is a symbol for the church to become a contrast society that transforms the world. Being a preservative that maintains the flavor God intends for it is a priority for the church when it is surrounded by forces that will try to dull its influence and diminish its effectiveness. Jesus knew one of the hardest struggles his followers would face would be to keep the kin-dom of God, the realm of God, separate from the kingdoms of this earth. Jesus knew power and wealth corrupt, no matter who you are, so every possible effort must be made to follow his teachings over and above the lessons which are touted in our world. Jesus' path names and challenges our addiction to violence; it is a way that readily addresses the needs of the poor and seeks to relieve the persecution and oppression of the "least of these." Jesus is teaching us a different course of action toward "making a difference." He is promoting how the church, not wealth, prestige, or power, will make a lasting difference. Jesus is helping us understand God's law, given to the people of God a long time ago, as it was meant to be understood which is far more powerful.

This week, our little church was host to Western Service Workers as volunteers made around 3000 tamales for a fundraiser to support the low-income service workers across our county who are just trying to survive. On their breaks, several were walking our property picking up trash, cigarette butts, and such. I have to tell you the smell in this building was delicious and made it hard for Julie and I not to make a beeline to the nearest Mexican restaurant asap. It got me to thinking how much, what was once a rare cultural experience, has slowly changed our appetite here in the US. When I was young, authentic tamales, enchiladas, quesadillas, chips and salsa were really hard to find, especially outside of California, Texas and the southwest. Now, a town without Mexican food can't really be called a town, maybe a blip on the map. Spanish immersion schools are giving our students great experiences learning the language

and culture, making them better educated and tolerant in their interactions as they grow older and enter the work field. Not by power, not by might, not by wealth have salsa and tamales changed American culture. Our culture has changed and is changing simply by our Hispanic brothers and sisters coming and being and doing. Just as salt adds seasoning to a rather plain diet, as it serves as a preservative and cleansing agent, so does diversity in our culture enhance our lives. Through the labor, relationships, cooking, and traditions of the Hispanic culture, we are becoming a better society. In actuality, Hispanics are much closer to the sociological status of those whom Jesus addressed on that mountain in Matthew. Thus, they have much to teach us about Jesus' words, values, and priorities in establishing a new realm of God's. They are the blessed we talked about last week who mourn the injustice and oppression of human history; they are the blessed hearers who were meek in the face of imperialistic might and demeaning pride; they are those blessed peasants who desired above all else for God's righteousness to overcome government forces taking away their human rights to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. Yet there are some in charge who try to convince us that simply being the kind of people Jesus calls us to be, that is, peacemakers, lovers of enemies, seekers of justice and righteousness, is dangerous because such folks don't support the mantras of achieving wealth, power, and prestige above all else. They are deemed criminals and parasites without any proof. Now Jesus certainly was no utopian idealist; he knew that proclaiming and living according to the reign of God meant trouble, but it would be that "good kind of trouble" former Congressman John Lewis spoke of.

Here at the beginning of this all-important sermon of Jesus' is both a calling and a warning: a calling to be God's salt and light in a world so desperately in need; and with that calling, a warning that if we refuse, then we will be considered useless in God's realm, cast out from the diverse and enhanced menu of God's culinary gifts, having only added to the darkness rather than spreading the light. Jesus speaks to us all saying, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the realm of heaven... So let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to our God in heaven." Amen.