

## RESTORING BEAUTY

Matthew 5:13-20

It is customary to end a worship service with a benediction – *bene dictio* – a “good word” of blessing, of encouragement as we are sent forth in to the world that God loves. It is always placed at the end of the worship after we have had a time to adore, confess, reflect on scripture, pray for ourselves and others, make our offering, recommit ourselves, and only then do we get a “good word.”

What would happen if we reversed the process and began with the benediction, began with a good word of encouragement. Would this be cheap grace? Would we feel we had earned such a blessing, after all we have done nothing to deserve this, and done a lot to prove our unworthiness? But this is exactly what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount. This “sermon” is not a sermon as such, but a collection of teachings that Matthew has put together for his remnant community. They are the ones who survived the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and moved to Antioch, Syria. Still, this collection of teachings begins with a benediction: *Blessed are... the poor in spirit, those who mourn, are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers*, ending with *Blessed are you even when people revile you and persecute you...* It is as if the Gospel writer looks at this remnant band, and recognizes the reality of their spiritual hunger and physical suffering, their need for compassion, and says, even so, “blessed are you.”

Let us begin with a benediction. Blessed are you, Foothills. “At the heart of the universe is a heart of love that embraces us and accepts us unconditionally. This heart of love is the source of our existence and life. This loving heart created us for a purpose and has given us every resource we need to fulfill that purpose” (Rob Voyle, *Core Elements of the Appreciative Way*).

*Blessed are you!* Then Jesus emphasizes the blessings by saying to those gathered around him on the hillside: You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. This “You” is a plural pronoun referring to the members of Matthew’s second generation community, and we listen, and hear that we, too, are “the salt of the earth,” and “the light of the world.”

Of course in our context these images can be confusing. We have too much salt in our life and too much light in our world. The American Heart Association recommends less than a teaspoon of salt a day, and the other day I heard it was down to ½ teaspoon a day. I randomly picked up some chicken broth the other day and realized it had 2 tsp. of salt in the package - and we don’t even want to talk about fast food.

When I say there is too much light, I am really talking about energy. We speak of breaking our dependence on foreign oil, but not our addiction to light. In our urban areas we are never out of the glare of lights, so much so we can’t see the stars. We can’t see the light because of the light. We are surrounded by ambient light 24 hours a day, streetlights, alarm clocks, watches, TV’s, computer screens, iphones, ipods, ipads, aie – yi - yi... Think about it, actually, we don’t think about it. When Jesus taught about light, the day was light and the night was dark. Salt and light were easily imagined. It is not so clear today. Now they are merely metaphorical suggestions.

When Jesus spoke of salt he spoke of a precious commodity. Soldiers were paid with blocks of *salarium*, a salary. Most home cooks maintained a block of rock salt, a rock with salt embedded in it. It was used to flavor foods, and when the salt was used up, they threw it out the window into the street. There are streets paved with such spent rocks. Light was created by small clay oil lamps that extended the day for a few hours. Light was a luxury, only the king and the very wealthy could afford candles, oil-soaked torches, and braziers.

Light meant hope. Matthew spoke of Jesus by recalling the words of the prophet Isaiah (9:2a), that *the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light*. Salt meant healing for it had antiseptic qualities, which is why we still gargle with salt. So, rubbing salt into the wound may not be such a bad idea, after all.

You are salt and you are light, don't lose your flavor for life, don't lose your spark of inspiration. But we do lose it. We are imperfect and conflicted people. We want so much to please others so we find the path of least resistance. Just listen to these words by a famous preacher of a few years ago. "We have come through a time of peril – and we are not finished with it yet – when we were told: 'Everything will be quite different when you as a church cease to have such an entirely different flavor – when you cease to practice preaching which is the opposite of what the world around you preaches. You must really suit your message to the world; you really must bring your creed into harmony with the present. Then you will again become influential and powerful.'" Wow! This sounds very much like the advice that is given to help churches grow and prosper and be relevant in today's world. Just look at the way the churches that preach prosperity have prospered.

This sermon was written by Martin Niemöller in 1938, just days before he was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp. This was the same Martin Niemöller who survived the war and later wrote: "In Germany, they first came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the homosexuals, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a homosexual. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me - but by that time there was no one left to speak up."

*You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? You are the light of the world... No one puts their light under a bushel basket, but on a lamp stand. Let your light shine.* Rather than simple, childlike aphorisms, this is a call to live in the world with courage. Rather than thinking your salt is common and your light is insignificant, you have power, more than you realize.

In his 1994 inaugural speech, Nelson Mandela (quoting Marianne Williamson) spoke a powerful word to the world. "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us most. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and famous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in all of us. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

If we are salt, then we won't only find comfort and assurance in being something but will find our purpose and identity in doing something significant, and that something will work a difference in the world around us rather than simply conforming us to the values of the culture

that surrounds us. "Any church that adapts itself so completely to the secular world around it that its distinctive calling is forgotten has rendered itself useless," Douglas Hare writes. And if we are to "be" light, it is really God's light that is shining through us, he says, for we are "not the light itself but only the window through which the light is to be seen," as we do the works of healing, justice, and mercy that are "indelibly etched pictures of the [God's] love" (Matthew, Interpretation).

My hope for our church Summit Meeting on April 10<sup>th</sup>, that I mentioned at our Annual Meeting last week, is that we will articulate our purpose as a church in this time and place, and taste and see what flavor we add to the world, and what light shines through us. The question is: "How do we, through being faithful, restore the beauty of God's first intention?"

The church is no secret society, Jesus tells us, right from the beginning. Or, as Eugene Peterson translates it, "We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill....Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep open house, be generous with your lives" (The Message). As we strive to live faithfully in the world, we may feel small, but we are mighty, not because of our own strength but because of God's own grace, which will never leave us on our own. Amen.