

January 30, 2022 Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Matthew 5:13-20

"Matthew: A Portrait of Jesus"

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Today is the first in a sermon series on the four distinct portraits of Jesus found in the gospels. Clearly all four gospels discuss Jesus in similar terms, using similar material, but each also has their own perspective and emphasis. Our scripture reading this morning was an excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, one of five major discourses Jesus gives in the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus is ever teaching, teaching, teaching. He is up at the front of the classroom, before the chalkboard, scribbling madly, explicating, gesticulating, willing his wisdom into the hearts and minds of the disciples. Matthew's Jesus is supremely confident that his students are capable of great things. He has remarkably high and exacting standards for them because he so deeply believes in them.

Matthew's Jesus, like just about any talented teacher, has something important to teach us about ourselves. We are told that we are salt and light. In our modern day we hear these words with a different ear. We hear salt and light and high blood pressure and skin cancer may come to mind. But in those days salt and light were incredibly valuable and essential to life.

In ancient Roman times salt was so precious that it was used in part as a means of paying wages. In fact our English word "salary" comes from the Latin word, "sal," which means salt. We still use colloquial expressions such as "are you worth your salt?"

Historically the function of salt was to preserve, to purify, and to season. Before refrigeration, salt was used to preserve meat. Without salt, food spoiled, rotted and had to be thrown away. Salt preserved what was good. Salt also has the medicinal function of purifying. In the pre-bactine days people used to use salt compresses to prevent infection. And none of this even speaks to salt's ability to season. Go ahead, try a French fry without it.

Light has also become devalued in our world. Edison's contraption, the light bulb, has made it ubiquitous at the flip of a switch. It takes considerable effort to find a location that is truly dark. But in ancient Palestine, people only had candles and oil lamps to keep the darkness at bay. Light was a precious commodity to be celebrated and used wisely.

We are being taught of how valuable we are; how important we are. Jesus is teaching us we are capable of accomplishing great things; we have been meticulously created to excel in vital ways.

And then Matthew's Jesus teaches us about how we are called to live. The community to which Matthew was writing was a group of predominantly Jewish Christians. As they sought to understand who they were called to be and how they were called to live together, the question of the role of Torah, the law

given to the nation of Israel, was essential. Did Jesus' world-changing life, death, and resurrection make the law obsolete? And if it did, how do we live now?

Matthew's Jesus is emphatic. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter," or as it reads in the King James version "not one jot or tittle...will pass from the law until all is accomplished." Jesus does not show up and throw away all that has come before. Like all good teachers he recognizes that until we understand our tradition we cannot move forward. Later in the gospel Jesus will debate with religious leaders over interpretation of the law but he never devalues the law.

As we heard, Jesus comes to fulfill the law, in other words to embody the law, to personify it, to place it before us in flesh and blood. He opens our eyes to the intention of the law.

In Jesus' life we experience God's intentions for us. Jesus teaches wisdom. Jesus heals. Jesus loves us enough to die for us and lead us to everlasting life. This is what the law is supposed to be, a gift from God that teaches, that heals, that leads us to everlasting life thanks to God's grace.

When an interpretation of the law does not do these things we have misunderstood the law. The law is not a set of requirements created to please God. Jesus never asked others to bow down before him for his own satisfaction. Just as Jesus dedicated himself to us and our welfare, so the law is given to us for our service, for our welfare. Jesus' honors the Sabbath

and keeps it holy but it does not stop him from healing the man with the withered hand in the temple on that day.

Matthew's Jesus is an extraordinary teacher who teaches us two extraordinary things. The first is that we are valuable, essential; we are capable of remarkable things. The second is that throughout all eternity, from creation, to the giving of the law, through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God is always teaching us, healing us, and showering us with eternal love and concern.

What's not to like about this? We learn that we are fabulous and that God loves us. Sounds good to me. Let's wrap this up and go for brunch. But then we hear the final line of this morning's text, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Did anyone else just hear a loud thud in the room? Jesus may have significant conflicts with the scribes and the Pharisees, but these folks had dedicated their lives to expressing their faithfulness to God by following God's law. And now, unless we can do better than them the gates of heaven are clanged shut in our faces. I knew we should have left for brunch several minutes ago. And it only gets worse. Several verses later in this chapter Jesus talks about cutting off our hand if it might cause us to sin, and loving our enemies, finally even calls us to be perfect. Eesh.

At this point I will let you in on a little secret. Matthew's gospel has always been my least favorite. It is sometimes called the gospel of higher righteousness because at

every turn Jesus is always raising the bar of expectations on us. When I read Matthew sometimes I feel a little overwhelmed.

But that is not really what is going on in this gospel. Yes, Matthew's Jesus pushes us to an ethical standard that appears to be impossible for us to achieve. However this push does not come without context. As I have said, in Matthew Jesus is a great teacher. And great teachers do not give their students more than they can handle.

I am reminded of one of the lunchtime conversations we had while I was a student in seminary. As we sat around the table somehow we found ourselves in a discussion about what to do if you were serving a congregation that was not very good at being welcoming on a Sunday morning. Many ideas were tossed around the table. A common theme was preaching a sermon imploring people that they need to be more welcoming. Then my friend, the Keuchman, offered his thoughts. The Keuchman (yes, clearly not his real name but my nickname for him) was a second career student who had spent much of his life in the church and had acquired great wisdom during that time. He led us in an entirely different direction. He said you do not tell people they are failing and risk having them feel reprimanded. What you do is continually compliment them on how welcoming they are until they believe it about themselves and start acting that way. "Oh yeah, that's right, we are a very welcoming congregation of course I will go over to talk to the visitors at coffee hour!"

I believe that is what Matthew's Jesus is doing in this gospel. He has told us we are the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world." What better way to show his trust in this

reality than by announcing that we are capable of the most remarkable things? Of course we can exceed the faithful efforts of the religious leaders of the day. Of course we can love our enemies. Of course we can strive to be perfect as our God is perfect.

We should not hear Matthew and his theme of higher righteousness as a threatening harangue against us, but rather as an uplifting and motivating call upon our lives. Only God can see how truly amazing we are and all that we are capable of doing. And God has sent the only son, the ultimate teacher, to open our eyes to this reality. His teaching allows us to recognize that every law, every ethical standard offered to us is a gift given to us that we might fulfill who we were created to be.

In Matthew, Jesus is indeed that teacher at the front of the classroom, before the chalkboard, scribbling madly, explicating, gesticulating, willing his wisdom into our hearts and minds. And in turn, we are his gifted students, capable of learning and growing in ways beyond what we would have previously imagined.

Thanks be to God. Amen