

## **“Identity and Purpose” – February 8, 2020 – Matthew 5:13-20**

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Here in this passage from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has just begun to teach the small group of people who have gathered around him on this mountainside. These are his disciples, his close followers, and in this lesson, he gives to them identity and purpose. At this beginning point in his ministry to them, Jesus shows that he understands human nature so very well. Perhaps the most basic, the most fundamental questions that we humans have and strive to answer throughout our lives are – who am I, and what is my purpose in life? In our attempts to make sense of this world in which we find ourselves, we wrestle with these questions. We struggle with them – who am I, and what is my purpose? - and how we answer those questions will have an impact on everything else. Some people go through their lives never figuring them out.

Who am I? Jesus says, you are the salt of the earth. What is my purpose? Jesus says, you are the light of the world. Notice how Jesus phrased those statements. He did not say, you should attempt to be like salt or you should strive to be like light. He is stating as fact that they already are these things. They followed him up onto this mountainside by the Sea of Galilee, curious about this teacher who had come into their region, visiting their synagogues and healing their sick. They recognized that there was something different, something special about him. He was someone who had answers, someone who could help them make meaning of this thing we call life. And through his blessings of them, which we hear in the beatitudes just prior, he was someone who saw them where they are – in their marginalized, oppressed, painful, hungry, longing-for-more existence.

He identified them as salt of the earth. The mineral salt is an amazing resource. We use it mainly for its features of flavor enhancement and for melting the ice on our sidewalks. Before refrigeration, salt was used as a preservative. Back in the first century, salt was sometimes used as currency, and it was highly valued as an item of trade. Salt was also used in some surprising ways. According to theologian Ronald Allen, salt “in ancient times was rubbed on newborn children, used to seal covenants, sprinkled on sacrifices, and understood as a metaphor for wisdom.” (from *The Lectionary Commentary*) Salt is precious, it is useful and it has multiple and varied functions. Being salt means being able to have a direct impact on everything around us.

Jesus asks, if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? Of course, we know that as a mineral, salt is salt. In its pure form it will never lose its taste or function. Only when fillers are mixed with it does its worth diminish. Non-salt fillers lessen its value.

Jesus is not afraid to say to them, salt that has lost its saltiness is worthless and should be thrown out. Purge the worthless. It is no longer good for anything but taking up space. If we

consider this metaphor in relation to what it is to follow Jesus, here is what we have. A follower of Jesus has some specific innate qualities. And in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus will begin to unpack what it means to be a follower of him, what it means to live in the realm of God that has broken through into the earthly realm that yields so much power and influence on us and all of creation.

Yet we followers of Christ, we leaders in the church, are inundated by the influences of this world - we can very well and easily find ourselves diluted by worldly fillers. When that happens, and oh yes it does, my friends, of how much use are we to Christ and to the inbreaking of God's realm? The world beckons us to adopt and promote its values, to get wrapped up in its pettiness, to fall prey to the divisiveness that rips apart relationships. And we have previously seen the church and are currently seeing the church diluted by all manner of worldly fillers. And we wonder, can its saltiness ever be restored? Can the fillers be filtered out? Of course, they can. Who we are in Christ is who we are.

We are the salt of the earth and our identity is shaped by Christ. And that identity then gives us our purpose.

Jesus says to us, you are the light of the world. Again, like the image of salt, light has a rather simple and basic nature. When light exists, everything else is illuminated. Comedian Ellen Degeneres once quipped, "In the beginning there was nothing. God said 'Let there be light,' and there was light. There was still nothing...but you could see it a whole lot better."

The character of light by its very nature is the antithesis of darkness. Even the tiniest bit of light can make all the difference. Here's a story: There was once a cave that heard the voice of the sun calling to it, "Come up into the light... come and see my sunshine." The cave replied, "I don't know what you mean; there isn't anything here but darkness." Curious, the cave ventured forth, and it was surprised to see light all around. So then the cave said, "Come into my cave and see the darkness," but when the sun went into the cave, there was no darkness. (<http://lindynuggetsforlectionary.blogspot.com/2017/01/epiphany-5a-february-5-2017-scriptures.html>)

Jesus gets this point across when he shares examples of how light is used. A city up on top of a hill is exposed and cannot be hidden. In the home, when someone lights a lamp it's for the purpose of illuminating the room. The person would not then attempt to hide the light by covering it up. Instead they would put it up on the lamp stand so it could function as it was meant to, providing light to the house.

In the same way, you who are light, let your light shine in this world. Let others be bathed in that light. Let your good works, let what you do, point others to God. The light that we have comes from God. So, when we function as church, when we share the light of Jesus Christ in

the world around us, the world gets a glimpse of God. When we bring the good news of the inbreaking of the realm of God to others, the light of the gospel interrupts the darkness. In Jesus Christ we have found the antidote to darkness. And that gives us hope.

So just as it would be foolish to cover up a lamp in your home, thus stifling its true purpose, a church that hides the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ is equally foolish. A church that focuses completely inward, caring only for its members, has hidden the light of Christ. Christian writer C.S. Lewis once said, "The church exists for nothing else but to draw (people) into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became a (Human) for no other purpose." If looking inward is our goal, we might as well call ourselves a country club.

Jesus said to us, you are the light of the world. That is our purpose, to be light, to share light, to invade every darkness with the light of Christ. Of course, it's much safer to hang around with our own kind, with those people who are also identified as light bearers. But when we do that, the light gets wasted, just like flipping on a light switch in a room already flooded with natural light.

Our world is a mess – our nation is divided by mistrust, anger, and hatred. Even basic civility seems an unwelcome guest in our common spaces. We wonder if the rifts in our relationships can ever be mended. We are quick to take sides and point fingers. Or perhaps we draw back from the struggle wondering how Christ's words of peace and reconciliation can be heard over the din of vitriol. We see divisions in our families, our churches, our communities. We feel the weight of the stress – not only from our human failings, but also in the evidence of upheaval in the natural world, with fires, floods, record-breaking weather, disease, and extinctions.

For us members of the church, perhaps now more than at any other time in our lives, we must claim our identity and purpose – we are the salt of the earth, we are the light of the world – and stand firm in the hope of God's inbreaking realm. As I was writing last night, a dear friend sent me this timely quote by author, feminist and activist L.R. Knost, "Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of this world. All things break. And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention. So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you."