
Salty and Lit Righteousness

Matthew 5:13-20

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 9, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them. Our Gospel text today is part of one of Jesus' most famous sermons, what has been called the sermon on the mount. We are 10 verses into this sermon that begins in Matthew 5:3 and stretches through the end of chapter 7. Jesus has just spoken about those unlikely people who in God's kingdom are blessed. You remember those famous and unexpected blessings Jesus spoke. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, blessed are those who are reviled, persecuted, spoken falsely about for Christ's sake. These are the ones whom Jesus blesses and who will be blessed.

And from these words of blessing, Jesus continues to teach. He continues to instruct his closest followers within the hearing of the larger crowds, with the words we just heard in our gospel lesson. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. As we listen and learn from Jesus's teaching this morning, there are a couple of things that will help us hear more clearly the instruction Jesus gave his earliest disciples and gives us today.

Many folks in the south understand something about the English language that folks from some other parts of the country just don't quite understand. In English when I am talking to one person, I say, "You are the best." And if I am talking to multiple people, I say, "You are the best." Did you catch that? It didn't change. Yet folks in the south say, "Y'all." And really, it works quite well. "Y'all go see the uneven ground exhibit that Chapel is hosting at First Presbyterian Church." Or "Y'all come for the adult Bible study on Acts." No one gets confused. Everyone is included. As it turns out, there are other ways to speak this plural in English too depending on what part of the country you call home. Perhaps you say, "yinz" or "you-uns" or "you guys" or simply "you all." Or if your from another English speaking country you might say, "you lot" or "yous." Regardless of how people say it, they're trying to capture a way of speaking in second person to a group of people—to a collective you.

Unfortunately, the biblical translators who composed the most common translations of scripture didn't use any of these informal ways of speaking, so we miss an important aspect of Sermon on the Mount as a whole and our passage today in particular. You see, throughout this sermon, Jesus' says y'all. Jesus isn't just speaking to a group of individuals gathered before him as if they are alone. He speaks to them as a collective y'all. And he speaks to us as a y'all as well.

Jesus says to his followers, "Y'all are the salt of the earth. Y'all are the light of the world." Y'all are. Y'all are. This is an interesting phrase. Jesus doesn't say, "Y'all need to become," or "Y'all should try to be," or "Y'all should act like," or "Y'all should *do* this or that." Jesus simply says, "Y'all are." Jesus tells his disciples *who* and *what* they are. Jesus gives his followers their collective identity. But what is this identity? What is it that Jesus says his followers are?

Before we answer that question, I want to make sure we don't miss something that is incredibly important to the Sermon on the Mount as a whole. I've already mentioned it, but it's so obvious, we probably didn't even think about it. Yet, it is the only thing that makes this sermon imaginable or possible. We must remember that Jesus is proclaiming this message. Jesus—the one

who was the epitome of the existence he describes; Jesus—the one whose identity never conflicted with his actions; Jesus—the one who says the Sermon, who lives the sermon, because he is the Sermon; Jesus—who the Nicene Creed says is light from light, true God from true God; Jesus—the one who loves us, forgives us, and frees us to be the kind of people he says that we are; Jesus—the one who makes it so we don't have to be who we used to be. This Jesus makes it possible for these “y'all are” statements to be true. This means we can take these words seriously, and hear them as the gift, as the grace, that they are.

So Jesus says: Y'all living right side up in an upside-down world, y'all who are my disciples, y'all who are my followers, y'all are the salt of the earth.

Y'all are the salt of the earth. What does it mean for Jesus' followers to be salt? Is that a good or a bad thing? Wouldn't we rather be sugar? Wouldn't it have been better if Jesus would have said, “Y'all are the sugar of the earth. A spoonful of you makes the medicine go down. You make life's hard things a little better—sweeter.” I know that the time my grandma mistook the sugar jar for a salt container and poured the salt in, I really wished she would not have. Because when I dumped that big scoop of sugar on my cereal, I was not too thrilled it was actually salt. But Jesus says, y'all are the salt of the earth, so what about us being salt?

Salt is useful for many things. In the Old Testament, we learn salt was used in several ways to serve cultic functions. In Leviticus, Priests offered salt with their grain offerings as commanded by God. In Numbers, salt is a sign of loyalty and faithfulness to the covenant. And in 2 Kings, Elisha purifies bad water by putting salt in it. Salt is an offering to God, a sign of loyalty, and a means of purification. Just as salt is each of these things, so are we for the whole earth. Y'all are the salt of the earth.

We can think of other things for which salt is useful. Any who are familiar with cooking know the critical role of salt. The best chefs (at least on cooking shows) often only use salt on their meat as they begin cooking. They do this because salt brings out the flavor of the meat instead of hiding it. Salt draws out true flavor. Just as salt draws out true flavor, so do we for the whole of creation. Y'all are the salt of the earth.

When used on food, salt also seasons. I know you all have had the experience where your potatoes were just a little bland, but with the right amount of salt. Or the cookies you just baked just don't quite taste right, and then you remembered: the salt. Salt seasons. Just as salt seasons, so do we for the whole of creation. Y'all are the salt of the earth.

Salt serves other purposes in food too. Salt can be used to preserve. Before refrigeration, people salted meat to preserve it. By putting salt on the meat, the moisture inside was sucked out, and bacteria couldn't survive in it. If meat was salted when it was cold enough that it didn't spoil before the salt could take effect, salted meat could last for years. Salt preserves. Just as salt preserves, so do we for the whole of creation. Y'all are the salt of the earth.

Y'all can no doubt think of more things salt does just by virtue of being salt. The metaphor can extend further to those who follow Jesus. Perhaps you'll keep reflecting on this, remembering that in Jesus, y'all together are the salt of all creation.

Jesus also says, “Y'all are the light of the cosmos.” Again, I wonder what it means for Jesus' followers to be the light? Jesus gives us two ways we can understand what it means to be light in our passage. Jesus says, “A city built on a hill is not able to be hidden.” Light, as the city, can be seen. Jesus smashes together two metaphors: light and city on a hill. They are seen and people are

drawn to them. Light—like the city—is a witness to God’s reality in the world. And this light—like a city—cannot be hidden. This light is effective: it is seen. Y’all are the light of the cosmos.

Jesus gives another way for us to understand light by talking about a lamp. To state the obvious point, lamps light up rooms. So, it makes no sense—it is foolish—to light a lamp and put a basket over it. Covering the light of a lamp does not only destroy the effectiveness of the lamp, it also lends itself to disaster. Imagine putting a flammable basket on top of an open flame: not a great idea. Instead, lamps are put in places where their light can brighten the whole house. The one who lights the lamp also puts it on a table. Everyone in the house gets light when the lamp is put on the lamp stand. Light helps all people to see. Y’all are the light of the cosmos.

Jesus gives these examples, but I wonder what else light does by the simple fact that it is light. Jesus said light illuminates rooms. Light also reveals. The things that were once hidden are revealed in the light. The things that slip into the shadows of obscurity are made known in light. I think of the game called Sardines that my youth group used to play. The premise of this game is one person is the hider, and everyone else seeks. Once you’ve found the hider, you hide with that person. But the key to the game is that it must be dark. And if someone decides to turn on the light, the whole game is ruined because everything is revealed. Light reveals. Y’all are the light of the cosmos.

Light does other things too. Light enables us to bask in the beauty of God’s creation. If it were not for light, we would not see colors. Perhaps you’ll remember from your middle school science class that what seems to be plain light actually contains all the colors of the spectrum. I’m sure you’ve seen light pass through a prism or through raindrops and create a rainbow on the ground or in the sky. Light contains the colors that make a dark and grey world pop with the brilliance of the rainbow. Light shines God’s multicolored beauty in the world. Y’all are the light of the cosmos.

Light enlivens the beautiful, but it also blinds. I’m sure you all were told at some point growing up not to stare at the sun. Even when there is a sweet solar eclipse, or an amazing sunset, if you stare at the sun, the light can blind you. You remember Saul’s encounter with Jesus on the Road to Damascus. Saul was rounding up the people of the Way—Christians—to put them on trial in Jerusalem. As he journeyed, he encountered a great light that knocked him to the ground. After this encounter with Jesus, Saul was blind. Light blinds with the brightness of its truth. Y’all are the light of the cosmos.

So Jesus says to his followers on that mountain and to us today, “Y’all are salt and y’all are light.” So go and be. Be what and who Jesus has said we are. Jesus says, I have told you what you are, now go and be. Be as useful as salt for all of creation and be as effective as light that shines before others, and in this, our good works will draw others to the Father.

Later in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus speaks a word of warning also implied in his admonition for his followers to be who and what we are. Jesus says, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus is uncompromisingly serious about righteousness that flows out of who you are and the good works that come from being the people he has called and enabled his followers to be. Those who listened to Jesus understood the scribes and pharisees to be the most righteous, but Jesus says the right ways of being and doing that flow from his followers will be greater still. The righteousness of Jesus’ followers will be like salt that has not lost its taste and light that is not hidden. People of God’s kingdom, those who reflect God’s ways in the world, those who are called

and made new in Christ will have a righteousness that is salty and lit. Salt and light. Y'all are the salt of the earth. Y'all are the light of the cosmos.

Jesus says that in seeing this righteousness, in seeing the good works that flow from who Christ has graced us to be as his followers, God the Father will be revealed to others. Christ's people will be useful and effective. And all others, even the whole of creation, will give God glory when we are being who Jesus made us together to be. When we are salt and light, God will be glorified.

So church, be who and what you are in and through Jesus. May your righteousness be salty and lit. Because y'all are the salt of the earth. Y'all are the light of the cosmos. Amen.