

## **2-5-17 "Preserving, Illuminating, Being" A Reflection on Mt. 5:13-20 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK**

Well, here we go--the Sermon on the Mount, this after we were treated to last week's prelude of astonishing blessings for the most unlikely characters. So, yes, this means my message this morning is a sermon within a sermon—a two'fer in other words; your pastor's thoughts and your Savior's thoughts all mixed up together, kinda like stone soup, where delectables are tossed into a common pot and what comes out is sure to surpass, if not the sum of the parts, at least common expectations. At least that is always my prayer at this moment in our worship.

As is famously known, the first two ingredients to get tossed in to the Jesus-way-of-life-pot are salt and light. Now salt and light are not normally mixed together, indeed I would add that the only one who could pull that off is our Jesus; yet in his famous sermon that is exactly what Jesus is doing. So we must ask, "Why?" Why he do that? What's he up to? And why does he instruct *us* and indeed expect *us* to go there to?...to be salt and light in imitation of him? And what pray-tell does going there—becoming salt of the earth, becoming light to the world exactly look like for the likes of us? What does it behave like? Misbehave like? One thing that is not missed or misunderstood is that Jesus is placing becoming salt and light at the top of our bucket lists. It needs not be said, but these are imperative statements with any number of exclamation points following them; these are emphatic verses. There is nothing wishy-washy here.

And after salt and light we hear of something else remarkable, another key ingredient finds it's way into the brew: "a city on a hill" (which yes, means, Jesus' pot is a very, very big pot, like big enough for everyone). So we then must ask, "Why a metropolis? What's a bustling, vibrant, radiant unhidden city got to do with anything?" Well, clearly Jesus is saying something like, "you can never accomplish being salt, and can never pull off being light all by yourself, never without a whole community of faith surrounding you, upholding you, blessing and encouraging you in your efforts. Ain't going to happen without all involved moving in unison toward the common goal of being salt, of being light. "It takes a village." in other words. Think of the Women's March two weeks ago. One or two ladies with bold signs could never have pulled that off. It required a city on a hill. It required a globe village. In the same way, being faithful to Jesus requires a universal fellowship of imperfect but dedicated saints, all, as the song has it, "marching to the light of God."

Aside from the fact that it takes a village to pull off anything truly world-altering, without out such a city, without it being placed strategically for all

to observe, you're only so much hot air because all credulity and credentials are missing. A community of faith, indeed a faith tradition encompassing many millions of witnesses through the generations, it thereby validates the actions of an individual within said faith and tradition. Meaning also, a shared faith and tradition is a bonding agent which keeps sheep from going astray, keeps sheep from wandering afield, safeguarding faith from getting lost in a world of competing voices, ideologies, theologies, political persuasions and alternative facts. For friends of Jesus, a shining city on a hill focuses attention, passions, resources, human endeavors much like the point of a magnifying glass enables a light to eventually burst into a flame—a burning bush into the voice of God, a pillar of fire by day into the providence of God, the love of the Risen Christ into the Holy Spirit's dancing tongues of fire. Friends of Jesus depend upon all of that to accomplish all that they know they have to accomplish.

Obviously, we're tossing around any number of metaphors this morning—Jesus was an ace in that regard. So let's look at them a little closer. So salt. Salt was used as a preservative before refrigeration. Are we to infer from that that our faith is of nutritional value sustaining life. Sure. Sounds good to me. So, is Jesus saying be a nutritional agent for life's sake? Sure, why not? Salt also famously makes what is of nutritional value go down easier, more enjoyably—yes, like a spoon full of sugar. So, is Jesus saying we are to be someone who makes life easier and more enjoyable? Sure, why not? One of my NT professors at Bangor Seminary put it well saying Jesus is teaching us “You are to are to *add zest* to the life of the whole wide world” (Douglas Hare). Zest. He also suggested that a better contemporary translation might be “salsa.” “Be salsa” ...or even red hot peppers. “Be red hot peppers to the world.” For God's sake, really spice things up. It's fun, for God's sake just do it.

And then there is light. Where would the world be without light? Without perspective, insight, a sense of direction, even warmth? By paraphrasing Jesus in the negative we'll perhaps hear him anew: “Don't be darkness in the world. Don't neglect to shine the light of reason, sincerity, integrity on everyone. Don't hesitate to warm one another.” At least that is what I hear. Taken together these metaphors are about being dynamic, not static, about nurturing, about becoming reasonable forces in the world, for the sake of the world's welfare. I hear Jesus say, “Get out there into the streets and make life all that life can be!” Yes, add zest to life everywhere. Bring good things everywhere, for everyone. Be a radical counter-force to all the many forces that degrade human beings.

As insightful as all these metaphorical illusions are, ultimately metaphors are but tools for us to use to be creative and productive. Are we using them adequately? Are we using them to better understand who and whose we are and then the big picture of what God wills for us and for all creation? Unless

you live in a bubble or have chosen to bury your head in the sand I'm guessing that the world is something that has been on your mind with particular urgency as of late, say for that last two weeks, as this is certainly true of tens of millions of people the world round. What with people finding themselves encumbered with new anxieties over battles their grandmothers once fought; what with people whose professional lives have been interrupted, placed on hold, people who have been incarcerated at airports when all they were doing was arrive home, and countless other people fearing the loss of their liberties and their securities—yes, with just cause, most people's minds have been racing.

I confess that when I look at the news these days I do so with a mix of incredulity and horror. I say this for obvious reasons, I don't find much to read on subjects that bear much of any resemblance to salt and light, or a shining city on a hill. I confess I find far, far more than I wish to of the opposite sort, stark examples where salt and light have clearly gone missing. For example the tsunami of headlines that consume themselves in some way with the fear of strangers.

What this tells me more than anything is that the need for Jesus' people to do their insightful, zesty, warm-embracing thing is greater today than it has been for a very long time, perhaps the greatest in my life time. So Jesus' words to us this morning are extremely time-sensitive, extremely significant. Because friends, we've all been baptized by the One and only who insists we love our enemies. Presently, wouldn't you say, the distance between fear of strangers and love of enemies is rather huge? And yes, very much so, the gaping chasm that is opening ever-wider lands in our Christian laps, becomes our Christian task; because by virtue of our faith it is our responsibility to heal, to restore, to bring back together, to banish fear...doing so is the very definition of being salt of the earth and light to the world. Yes, my friends, as a colleague in ministry wrote, the life of Jesus and his claim on our life very much involves "a hate-rattling decision to love defiantly in the face of violent intolerance" (John Pavlovitz).

So go and do. There is no shortage of opportunities, no lack of people lacking zest and surrounded by darkness...everywhere there are people who don't realize that statically, in America, anyone of us has a much greater chance of being killed by a lawnmower than a terrorist, or hit by lightning...they don't know that! They don't know that statistically speaking any one of us has a much higher chance of dying by being buried alive, or by choking on food, or by slipping in the shower. They don't know that for some mind-boggling reason! Despite such stark statistics, and such low incident of terrorist attacks, they don't know! Instead the world abounds with people full of fear of imaginary grime-rippers in the form of strangers—be they from the American Heartland, from San Francisco, or from Syria—fear is eating people alive!

So go and do. Speak truth to power; speak truth to ignorance; speak truth to prejudice and hate:

Mexicans did not cause the housing sub-prime mortgage crisis.

Syrian refugees did not ship millions of jobs overseas to China.

Muslims did not work you twice as hard and pay you half as much.

Undocumented aliens did not destroy your pension with junk securities.

Immigrants, legal or otherwise, are simply not the problem.

Friends people just like you who call Jesus friend, people just like us with access to the infinite resources of God's salt and light simply have to speak out, speak up, simply have to be witnesses to the truth, to reason, to justice. Yes, we simply have to, in the most demonstrable ways, "love defiantly in the face of violent intolerance." Period! And congratulations, if in so doing you one day find yourself squarely withing God's shining City on a hill—hopelessly lit up, hopelessly filled with zest, forever surrounded by that which cannot be hid--then you've arrived!

Thanks be to God and Amen.