

Matthew 5:13-16

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The word “law,” for many of us, especially people of color or people without much money, does not have a positive connotation. There are good reasons for this. In our nation, laws are not applied and enforced equitably. The color of a person’s skin, the amount of money in their bank account, and even how a person is dressed, influences how our laws impact people who are accused of breaking them. The phrase “long arm of the law,” referring to the far-reaching power of law enforcement authorities, feels much more oppressive to our neighbors who are not wealthy, well-connected, and of course, who are not white.

The Bible talks a lot about the Law and the trouble we have is that we bring our 21st century baggage about our 21st century laws right into the story. And truthfully, it doesn’t belong there. The Law (with capital L), from a Jewish perspective, wasn’t unjust, cruel, or punitive. The Law was given by the Holy to help the people live together, in good relationship with each other, which meant they were in good or right relationship with God. The Law was meant to create a nation in which the covenant between God and the people was kept. That covenant, you will be my people and will be your God, is important to the Christian tradition. Unfortunately, traditional Christianity, at times, has treated Torah Law as if it doesn’t matter because Jesus came along and now there is a “new covenant.” But that is not how Jesus understood his ministry. As far as Jesus was concerned, the covenant was the same, the people just needed to live it in the spirit in which it was intended. And he spent a lot of time trying to teach his followers what that looks like.

Our text today about salt and light is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. In this sermon, Jesus was teaching his followers what it meant to be, and how to be, his disciples. The sermon begins with the beatitudes, which is a list of desirable qualities and ways of being in the kin-dom of God, which is a world in which God’s way is the way. The beatitudes each begin with “Blessed are...” And generally, the people identified as “blessed” are exactly the opposite of the ones who were feeling “blessed” in first century Israel, and in our world today honestly.

Right after the beatitudes, we come to this:

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God.

That is the end of today’s “official” reading, but to make sense of it, I think it is helpful to add the next two verses:

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

The upside-down world of the beatitudes and this proclamation that Jesus had come not to make the Law go away, but to fulfill it, was good news to Jesus’ followers. You see the oppressive laws of the Roman Empire were very different from Jewish Law for which the people had great affection. They knew that God’s way was the way of true justice, mercy, and steadfast love, the way of relationship.

In Psalm 119, the psalmist’s words are a good example of how the people felt about the Law. “My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times.” (Psalm 119:20). The Law is about helping people understand the connectedness of all of creation and act accordingly. It is about God’s dream of right relationship (wholeness) within all of creation. Jesus did not come to the people as a newly deputized law enforcement officer. He came as a representative of God’s love and care for all people, and for all we share this earth with.

The Law of the Torah is relational. It reflects how we impact and are impacted by everything and everyone else. One way to understand today’s text is that Jesus used salt and light as metaphors for this connectedness. First, salt. It flavors anything with which it comes in contact. And you know this if you have ever accidentally salted something you didn’t intend to. There is no going back. If you accidentally put salt instead of sugar in a recipe, there is not enough sugar anywhere to fix it. The salt will make itself known. When I was a child, I made cinnamon and “sugar” for my toast with salt instead of sugar. It was a situation.

Salt impacts its surroundings and, likewise, salt crystals are gradually reshaped and crumbled by water, earth, and creatures, including human beings. Similarly, light is changed by the shadow of everything that passes near it. Light is not more valuable or better than shadow. Life-giving things happen in both darkness and light. And we know how light impacts when it shines. I think of that every time I have to use my phone flashlight to read a menu in a dark restaurant.

So, to say that human beings are both salt and light is to say that we change and are changed by everything and everyone with whom we share this earth. We are beautifully connected and intimately related. Jesus didn't come to change that...why would he? He didn't come to encourage us to be inflexible or morally superior, but to show us how to live in mutual loving relationship. That's what he wanted for his followers who were listening to the Sermon on the Mount and I feel certain that if he were here today, he would want the same for us.

I think it is important for us to remember who Jesus was and know who the followers were he was talking to 2000 years ago, when he proclaimed them salt and light. Jesus was an obscure peasant teacher from Nazareth, living in a tiny nation of the mighty Roman Empire. He was a regular guy who seemed to understand the big picture in ways that resonated with people who hadn't really been included in the big picture. To the people in power, these people weren't even important enough to be even an afterthought. Unless, of course, they stepped out of line, then they became a priority, but only momentarily, until they were squashed.

So, to put this into today's context, Jesus was not speaking to politicians, CEOs of large corporations, and honestly, he wasn't even speaking to the mid-level manager types, like a lot of us. In that world, there were rich people and poor people and not a lot of in-between. The people with the money and power were not being called salt and light. Why? Because they were not impacted by anything or anyone. When drought came, it wasn't the wealthy who suffered. When the people suffered, the people in power did not suffer along with them. Sound familiar? Trickle-down economics didn't work then either.

Keeping that in mind, if Jesus was here, in Bartlesville or anywhere in the United States, to whom would he be saying, "You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world?"

Let's say that is not a rhetorical question. I am asking you, "Who is the salt of the earth and the light of the world today, in our context? Who is most impacted by their surroundings and the actions of other people?"

(Wait for responses)

When I ask for it:

(POC, immigrants, LGBTQ+ community, drag queens, teachers, survivors of abuse, senior citizens, children, people who are not Christians)

And I would add to this list of the salty and sparkly anyone who aligns themselves and their way of being with the beloveds we have listed. Anyone who is impacted by the suffering, injustice, inequality, and life experiences of others, especially if that impact causes an outpouring of solidarity and compassion, those people are salt of the earth and light of the world too. You, DCC community, are salt of the earth and light of the world. That is why I love serving as your minister. The ways in which you work to understand the experiences of people who are different from you and the ways in which you use your voices and your actions and your money to help them makes you salt and light.

Which brings me to my final point. We can blow out a candle, turn off a light, and sit in the darkness, but the sun will always rise the next day. Light will always be. And I don't think anyone would have challenged Jesus on this, but it is not actually possible for salt to lose its saltiness. There are enough science-y people in this room that I know if I am wrong about this, you will correct me later. But, as I think about it, we can mine it, crush it, grind it, bake it, and stick it on the rim of our drinks...we can even dissolve it in water, but if we allow the water to evaporate, we will have salt. If we follow the metaphor, that means you/we will always be salt of the earth. Once human beings realize how connected we are to one another and to the web of life that is the earth, we can never go back. We see it and feel it all the time. It changes us and, in turn, we change the world.

You know, I think sometimes we read passages like this and think they are a call for us to get busy doing something or being something different. Ready, set...be the salt of the earth! Be the light of the world! But I believe, if we think about who Jesus was talking to, maybe this passage is more about recognizing that we are already salt and light. Maybe the challenge for us is more about lifting away the things that are diluting our saltiness or dulling our shine. I'm thinking about things

like fear of traditions or ideas we don't yet understand or fear of not being enough. Or maybe anxiety over not having enough keeps us focused on things and not people. Whatever it is that is making you less sparkly or salty, learn more about it and remind yourself that you have everything you need to see the Divine spark in your neighbors and to respond with compassion.

In Nichola Torbett's commentary on this text, she shared a Jewish legend. I will end with it this morning.

"Legend has it that when ancient Assyria conquered the Jews and forced them into exile, some of them never returned. No one knows where they went. They are said to have been scattered throughout the world, unknown even to themselves. It is further believed that despite this estrangement from Jewish community, these lost ones remember the Torah in their hearts and continue to live it out, wherever they are. The spirit of the Law is preserved in them, and no matter what else gets torn down...the Law will remain. The knowledge of how to live in mutual relationship will remain. [So], the existence of the lost exiles means that anytime we meet a stranger, an immigrant, a refugee, or anyone in need, we can never know that they are not a long-lost cousin or soul friend."¹ That, friends, is the long arm of the Law.

You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And no one can take that from you. Amen.

As we enjoy the song Alex is about to share with us, if you have been visiting DCC for a bit, I invite you to consider whether you would like to become a member of this light and salty community. DCC is held together by our common purpose: to welcome and include everyone, to grow and change together, and to serve, with compassion, our community, specifically the ones who are most vulnerable by working for equity and justice. And to love one another and our neighbors well. If you would like to say yes to all of that, I invite you to come forward after this gift of music.

¹ Torberr, Nochola, commentary on Matthew 5:13-20, enflashed. Accessed 5/4/23.