

February 5, 2017  
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

**“That’ll Preach!”**  
*by Mary Anne Biggs*

Isaiah 58:1-9a ~ Matthew 5:13-20

When I read this passage I was transported back to my “Introduction to Preaching” class at seminary. I had a wonderful professor who followed a standard procedure. Students would preach a sermon that they had been working on for weeks, and it would immediately be followed by a feedback session. The professor would first talk about the “strengths” of the student’s message ... then move on to lift up “strengtheners.” The goal, of course, was to help the student accept constructive feedback offered in a non-threatening manner. So I was imagining what my professor might have had to say if Jesus had preached the sermon we heard today in his class. “Now, Jesus, let’s talk first about the strengths of the message. You used some good, down-to-earth imagery ... salt and light. I would encourage you to continue that in your future preaching. But you also need to remember what we learned earlier in the semester ... that every sermon needs to have one single focus ... and you are all over the map with this one ... salt ... light ... not coming to abolish the prophets ... breaking and keeping commandments. It seems almost like you put a bunch of short sayings together in a row. And one more thing ... your final sentence: ‘Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’ Where is the good news in this sermon ending? It sets out an impossible goal and then tells listeners they’ll be doomed if they don’t accomplish it. Upon hearing that, I can just imagine Jesus shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

Theologian Karl Barth once referred to preaching as “the impossible possibility,” by which he meant that for a human being to speak words of divine significance was impossible by human means alone ... but possible with God’s presence and power. Many people look at the Sermon on the Mount as an impossible impossibility.

The Roman Catholic or monastic interpretation was that the high ethical standards of the Sermon could only be fulfilled by monks and ascetics, not by everyday run of the mill Christians. Later, Luther’s view was that the Sermon sets out an impossible ideal in order to show us our inability to fulfill the law ... and to throw us back onto the mercies of God. But when read it in context ... within the entire Gospel of Matthew ... neither of these views is correct. We can’t support the monastic interpretation ... for we find that the Sermon is a call to repent ... not just for some ... but for all. The Sermon is a general summary of Jesus’ moral demands on all of Israel. It is clearly for the crowd and not just the disciples.

Nor can we reduce the Sermon to an impossibly high standard meant to rub our noses in our human weakness ... and a theological lesson on the need for grace ... for the Sermon is meant to be lived out ... and Jesus’ gracious presence threads throughout the book of Matthew to help us in that endeavor. The demands of the Sermon are accompanied by the helping presence of Jesus. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” “And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The end of this sermon is not a call to impossible ethical heights. Our righteousness is to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees because their practices had become external and perfunctory ... cut off from the radical love of neighbor and God that is at the heart of Judaism. The Pharisees were concerned with preserving the distinctiveness of Judaism ... and they had numerous interpretations of Torah concerning ritual cleanliness, dietary habits, and Sabbath activities. These were designed to be constant reminders of God's faithfulness amid the details of daily life. But in practice they became substitutes for inward obedience.

Jesus came to reform, not reject, his tradition. Yet his high view of scripture did not prevent his innovative interpretations that departed from the strict letter of the law. At the same time he affirmed the authority of Scripture ... but he also affirmed his role as its authoritative interpreter ... in keeping with the ultimate will of God. Faithfulness to his interpretation leads to a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees ... not in quantity ... but in quality. To read the Sermon on the Mount as an impossible possibility is to forget who it is who is preaching. This is the one anointed by the Spirit ... sent by the God of Abraham ... Moses ... David ... and the prophets to speak on God's behalf.

The Sermon on the Mount is not an impossible impossibility. It is *not*, in the end, just about what *we* are to do. It is about what God is doing. In his book *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning*, Stephen Patterson concludes that the picture of the God of Jesus in the synoptic gospels is of a God "who demands all ... but also gives all." In service to that God, the Sermon on the Mount becomes a moral vision for the life of the community to which each of us contributes.

The Sermon on the Mount is for everyone, not just a spiritual elite few. We are to read it and move toward being the salt and the light ... not just realize our human inadequacy in comparison with the holiness of God. We are to read it as a way of living ... in keeping with God's moral vision for humankind made possible by the demanding ... but also forgiving and empowering presence of God in Jesus.

When we read the Sermon on Mount ... or a portion of it out of context of the gospel of Matthew ... all that is left for us to do is criticize it for being extreme ... or criticize ourselves for being inadequate. When we read it out of context from who is speaking it ... we forget that the one speaking is the new Moses ... the anointed Son of God. It turns out that Matthew 5:20 ("Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven") is not a negative ending. It is a positive beginning of a life of following Jesus out of the classroom and into the waiting world.

So how can we do that? We are faced with the insidious temptation to hear Jesus' words as requirement rather than blessing ... as command rather than commissioning. But take note ... Jesus doesn't say, "If you want to become salt and light, do this...." Or, "before I'll call you salt and light, I'll need to see this from you ..." Rather, he says both simply and directly, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." It is, as with last week's Beatitudes, sheer blessing, commendation, affirmation, and commissioning.

I realize, of course, that he goes on to say that salt that has lost its saltiness is useless ... and that light wasn't made to be put under a bushel ... which might imply for some that there is, indeed, a threat hiding amid this pronouncement. But I wonder. Can salt really lose its saltiness? Doesn't it just dissolve? And are candles ever put under bushel baskets? Wouldn't that snuff the flame

or, worse, start a fire? Maybe he's just naming the absurdity of the possibility of losing one's character as salt and light in order to underscore the reliability and resilience of the gift he bequeaths. "You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world! That's the way it is ... and that's the way it will stay. Period."

Do recall the statistics about a children's self-esteem in relation to the messages they hear? Psychologists suggest that for every negative message elementary-aged children hear about themselves, they need to hear ten positive ones to restore their sense of self-esteem to where it had been previously. (Frankly, I don't know if anyone has studied this in groups other than young children, but I suspect that number doubles during adolescence and then recedes to about 10-1 again by adulthood!)

Children, to put it another way, become what they are named. Call a child bad long enough ... and he or she will believe you and act badly. Call a child (or teen or adult for that matter) worthless or unlovable or shameful, and eventually he or she ... all of us ... will live into the name we've been assigned. In the same way, call us good or useful ... dependable ... helpful or worthwhile ... and we will grow into that identity and behavior as well.

I realize, you see, that we have a hard time believing that we are good, worthy, and lovable ... and therefore you will perhaps nod politely when I call you salt and light ... you might not really believe it. (And while I think this is true of all age groups, I think it's especially true of adults! We know ourselves too well ... moreover, we believe our pastors are nice people paid to say these kinds of things!) But I'm sincerely inviting you to recognize your saltiness and your brightness. Take the time to remember where God has moved through you to help someone else. This may be difficult for many of us who were taught never to boast. Maybe you could practice by pointing out where you see someone else being salt or light, but, please don't just stop there ... see where God is using you as salt and light, too. Because I promise you ... God has ... is ... and will continue to use you because you are salt and light! And by naming yourself you will grow into that identity ever more fully.

Even more still, as a congregation, we will gain confidence in our identity as God's chosen and beloved children ... those called to be salt and light in the world and ... gaining this confidence ... we will be ever more truly what we have been named. In being salt and light ... seasoning and enlightening ... and fulfilling our fullest selves, we incarnate the highest values of the teachings of Jesus. Today, and every day, we can witness to God's nearness ... that enables us to live spacious and generous lives in solidarity with vulnerable persons ... and accept our commission to give light and flavor to every situation.

May we pray?

Eternal God, give us the strength to be salt and light to the world who needs our flavoring and our illuminating, as we point ultimately back to our Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.