

“Being Salt and Light” based on Matthew 5:13-20 and Isaiah 58:1-9a
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, February 5, 2023, Shelby Presbyterian Church

Last week, we heard Jesus speak words of comfort to his disciples and the crowd with them. He contrasted the popular values of this world and the Kingdom of Heaven. This Kingdom of Heaven in which the place of God’s presence comes to earth.

It is made visible not through the arrogant, but the poor in spirit. Its comfort is not for the positive thinker, but the mournful. The land is not inherited by the forcefully blunt, but the meek. Satisfaction will come to those who seek justice, not to those who are content as things are. The merciful, not the vengeful, get mercy.

It’s not those who get results by any means necessary, justifying their ways by their success, but the pure in heart – those the world calls naïve for their faith – who will see God. It’s the peacemakers, not the victors of war, who will be called God’s children. For the Kingdom again, belongs to those who have been persecuted, not the victorious, all because they believe in God’s justice. Indeed, taking up the way of Jesus, and not the world, may mean insults and persecution, slander and lies, but this is what they did to the prophets, so, rejoice for God has rewarded the prophets and will reward you.

And so, this is the backdrop of our reading today from Matthew about salt and light, so it needed repeating, because Jesus is speaking at this point to a mostly Jewish audience. They know persecution and the challenge of being God’s people in the world. Under Roman occupation, these are words of comfort for the defeated. But even apart from Roman occupation, when Judea was free, ruled by the Kings descended from King David himself, the prophets spoke these values and were cast out or killed, ignored and rejected, only to be proven right when the leaders who acted like the world, were defeated by the world and taken into exile.

And so it is to this audience, a people without power and privilege that Jesus comforts. And like last week, when we saw the words of the prophet Micah lining up so well, here too, we have the words of Isaiah, through whom God also spoke, providing support and structure to the words of Jesus from scripture. You see, there is something Jesus points to, when he says he did not come to abolish, but to fulfill the law and the prophets, which is important. Jesus’s audience is likely nodding their heads and Matthew’s audience believed to be Jewish readers may be asking, “Is this Jesus trying to replace our story? The faith of our ancestors? The identity given to us by the Lord our God?”

My mother had a saying, “A place for everything, and everything in its place.” It’s not original to her, but it was a goal, what with a family of eight living in just a few rooms, within a 16-room home, that was a dangerous construction zone, really. My parents bought the home for about \$8,000 in its disrepair, and little by little, my father made it livable, so they could move in. They purchased a little slice of chaos and created order. But for my mom, the forces of chaos overwhelmed her. So, she tried to push back, repeating to us, hoping we would just listen: “A place for everything, and everything in its place.” We weren’t so good at that.

In the ancient world, the concept of order versus chaos was at the forefront of people's minds. We see this in the words they used to describe destruction and perfection, abolishment and fulfillment. These things, to them, were rooted in function. Today, we think in a material world mindset. We think of things as existing or not existing. We think of destruction or abolishment, as the material end of things, destined for the trash heap. Likewise, we think of perfection as being without blemish, and fulfillment as a box on a checklist, checked off when it is done. And so, it can be hard to understand or translate these words in scripture.

But rather than thinking materially, I want you to enter my mother's experience. Think of order and chaos, as she managed a home with six kids ages newborn, me, to 16. My father worked first in other people's homes, then worked on his own on nights and weekends. The word we translate as abolish is *kataluo*, which means to "let loose." This word is often translated as destroy, abolish, or overthrow. But also, remember in Luke's gospel, when there was no room at the inn, the word for "lodging place," is this same word. Many years later, when scientists made a new English word, "catalyst," as the cause of a reaction, from these same Greek roots.

The next word I want you to think about is the one we translate as fulfill, is *pleroo* from the Greek *pletho*, which comes to us in English, as "plethora," meaning more than enough, and comes from this word meaning "full." Like the word from last week, *makarios*, that we translate as "blessed, happy, or content," this is a visually based word to think of something as being full. It is not checkboxes, but speaks of something being filled with all that it needs, like a home, with its contents – furniture, kids, and everything else.

Lastly, the word command, comes to us in both the Hebrew of Isaiah and Matthew's Greek, and in the Hebrew, it is *mishpat* meaning a judgement, or justice, a decree. In Greek, it is *entole*, which is a command and its end result or purpose. Why does this matter? It matters because the listeners to both Isaiah and to Matthew, would have been concerned about maintaining order in their world. The idea that Jesus would turn it upside down to them, as comforting as it might be for those in lower stations, might make them skeptical of Jesus' intentions and whether he was from the Lord God, who brings order to the chaos. It's like the saying about the "devil you know" being preferable to the unknown – change.

Jesus assures them that he has not come to let loose or disorder the law and the prophets, or undo them, but he has come to put everything in its place. This is the place where the Lord God intended, but which has been put out of place by sin, requiring the return of the King, embodied by Jesus himself, bringing the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven. This will give purpose to everything in the law and the prophets, which is not just a list of commands, but the story of Israel, the story of God's intervention in the world.

After all, Jesus is the ultimate example of God's intervention, being the Son of God, fully one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, yet born a human just like us, in our flesh with all its limits. He came to live as we live, die and for us, so that we might be temples of the Spirit, sharing in God's work to put things in their proper place, a right order, in and through Jesus by the ministry of reconciliation.

So, then we might ask, “how is this done?” Is it through the perfect practice of worship? How we do church? Is it in our robes and paraments? Is it our personal piety and how we conduct our lives? Is it our prayers? Yes, yes, yes, it is all of these things. Yet, also, none of these matter without justice.

You see, Isaiah’s passage is not saying it is wrong to seek the Lord, or that it is wrong to fast, or that it is wrong to delight in God, but these things are not a checklist to be accomplished. They are to be put in proper order, fulfilled, by loosening the chains of wickedness, undoing heavy burdens, letting the mistreated or oppressed, those in prisons, both real ones, and metaphorical ones, go free.

Worship is important. The theology of our church practices matter. We must be pious, and we should be on guard against personal sins, praying often in our lives. However, these are not ends, but means to doing God’s will and God’s will is the command, the judgement or the purpose, of our faith.

Today, we baptized Annie and Avery and this is a joyous day them and all of us. We have welcomed them into the family of God, baptizing them as Jesus commanded us, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are a blessing to all of us because they fill us with an awareness, of God’s presence with us.

But this command to baptize is not the end. The purpose is not merely to get people wet and declare them saved with a ticket to heaven. No, it is to form them as disciples of Jesus, by teaching them all that Jesus has taught us and walking with them in faith. We want them to hear these words today and recognize that they are the salt of the earth, and that they are the light of the world, so they can live into God’s purpose for them.

As salt, their purpose and ours is to enhance or bring out the flavor of God in this world. God is here and God is King, whether or not we worship or serve God. But if we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God and likewise, if we loosen chains, undo burdens, let people go free, and give food to the hungry, welcome the homeless, clothe the naked and be vulnerable, then we live into our purpose and the savory taste of God’s life comes out in its fullness.

Likewise, as salt, we want Annie and Avery to preserve what is good and purify this world. This again, comes by living as the Beatitudes described, not by seeking persecution, but by turning away from the values of the world, toward those values Jesus brought out. It’s about being comforted when we exhibit those traits, because we believe God is with us. In our relatively comfortable lives, it’s easy to miss the comfort these words offer, because we aren’t powerless and without privilege. We aren’t persecuted for our justice or for Jesus, at least not any of us in these pews, or just about any church in the U.S.

But Annie and Avery, and all of us, can be salt, to bring God’s flavor out and preserve what is good. Salt was so valuable in the ancient world, and it was used as a currency. From Latin, this is where we get our words ‘salary’ and ‘sale.’ We live into our value when we live into the Kingdom values. and so, we want to be, and we also want them to be the light of the world.

For if you've ever been in a very dark room, and brought in one small light, you've realized how much it can bring into focus. And when two, three, four, five and even more come in, like in our Christmas Eve candlelight service, you've seen little lights grow brighter and brighter. After all, when light comes in, so much more can be seen, and in the light, so much more can be done. We don't hide this light under shade, but let it shine for all to see.

This light is visible in our good works, not that these works earn us favor with God. No, it is by our works that the light is visible, a light that reflects Jesus the true light. In baptism, we recognize the baptized for their salt and light properties, but as a church, our job is not to just sit back and think we're done with all we need to do because we followed the right practice, and done our task.

Instead, let us hear Jesus's and the prophets' call for the proper order, by doing the work of God in the world all around us, bringing love and justice wherever we go in little things, like kindness and big things, like working toward building a better world. Let us be empowered by trusting first that we are loved, and believing the good news, of our God who says to us, "Here am I." Amen.