

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Fifth Sunday After Epiphany,
February 5, 2017

Don't Put Salt in Your Wounds

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February 5, 2017

Mathew 5:13-20

Last week I discussed the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, and today I want to talk about another part of Christ's magnificent sermon.

Our scripture reading for today immediately follows the Beatitudes in Matthew and actually is in two parts, each of which could be the basis of a sermon in itself but today I will discuss both parts.

The first part, Matthew 5, verses 13 through 16 begins with the very familiar phrase, "*You are the salt of the earth*" and follows a bit later with "*You are the light of the world.*"

What do these two phrases mean? Salt and light are necessary for life, **if** they are not excessive in quantity. Salt poured into a wound is painful and excessive light, for example the rays of the sun, can cause severe burns and damage to eyesight. Excessive consumption of salt will elevate blood pressure and in large quantities salt is very toxic. We need both salt and light but not so much that they become salt in our wounds.

In our scripture reading Jesus is talking metaphorically about the need for salt and light for spiritual health.

The reading is almost comical on its face. Saltless salt? Hidden lamps? No way, but the metaphors have a strong spiritual message.

Fred Craddock, et al ⁽¹⁾ explains the salt metaphor by stating that the quality of salt gives it identity and purpose and similarly "*The quality of following and obeying Jesus, even under hardship, gives a disciple identity and purpose.*" Remember that Jesus was preaching his sermon to his disciples, not to a crowd of followers. He was telling the disciples, and us, how to follow him and what to expect when we do.

The metaphor of light is more obvious. Christ said "*I am the light of the world*", and spreading that light, not hiding it, was the disciples' and our mission. "*Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in*

heaven”, said Jesus.

Verses 17 through 20 of our reading from Matthew switches gears to relate four sayings of Jesus and may have been meant to clarify misunderstandings about Jesus’ ministry. Jesus would become under attack by many people, notably the Pharisees and scribes, who would consider that his teachings were an attack on Mosaic Law. To the contrary, Jesus told the disciples, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets: I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”* In a way, it might have been better for Jesus to say this to the Pharisees and scribes as well as to his disciples.

As Walter Bruggemann, et al ⁽²⁾ said, *“What is radically new in the presence of God’s coming rule is not an abrogation but a completion of both the promises and demands set out in the law and the prophets.”* The disciples were devout Jews and Jesus needed to make them understand that he was not doing anything which was contrary to their beliefs but was, in truth, supporting them.

The religious authorities of the time followed the Law of the Torah rigorously and opposed any one who they believed did not follow their example. Jesus expected much more of the disciples saying, *“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

It was a good thing that the Pharisees and scribes did not hear that, I guess, or they might have crucified Jesus earlier than they actually did.

What Jesus was telling the disciples was that rigorously following the Law, as the Pharisees and scribes did, was not the key to salvation, and that it was hypocritical to think so.

Now, did Jesus want the disciples to literally and rigidly follow the Law of the Torah as the Pharisees and scribes did?

No he didn’t. He wanted them to follow the spirit of the Law, that is the substance of the Ten Commandments, or more succinctly his two Great Commandments, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and to love your neighbors as yourself. Love is the key --- love for God and love for others, not following the many picayune and insignificant parts of the Law which had little or no spiritual meaning or significance. If he meant to rigidly follow the 613 commandments of the Torah, his ministry would not have had much relevance. It would have been a rubber stamp for traditional Judaism of the time. There would have been no need for Christianity.

Jesus wanted the disciples, and us, to fulfill the demands of the Law --- that is to realize that there is only one God and to love him and to love others and not get tied down by literalism.

Does it really matter if someone cooks on the Sabbath or not? Does it matter if someone cuts their hair or shaves or not? Does it matter what kind of fibers your clothing is made of? Does it matter if you have a tattoo or not?

Of course not. What matters is loving God and loving others. That is what Jesus is really saying when he says that *“I have come not to abolish [the Law] but to fulfill”* it.

So, use salt in your food sparingly. Wear sun screen when you are outside. Go to the beach, breath in the salt air and swim in the salt water. Those things lower your blood pressure, not increase it.

While you are at the beach, look at God’s magnificent creation and look at it again when you return to these mountains. They are expressions of God’s love for you, for all of us, and return that love to God by the way in which you show your love for others.

Amen

1. Fred Craddock, et al, Preaching Through the Christian Year – Year A, Trinity Press International, Philadelphia, 1992
2. Walter Bruggemann, et al, Texts for Preaching – Year A, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011