Back to Basics

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany 2020

Matthew 5:13-20

*. . .let your light shine before people so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.*

*Matthew 5:16*

Today, we continue our journey through the Sermon on the Mount. One preacher I read, The Rev. Janet Hunt, called the Sermon on the Mount a “road map,” making concrete the inauguration Jesus announced at the beginning of his ministry: “Repent and believe, for the Reign of God has drawn near.”

This beloved passage of scripture we call the Sermon on the Mount is actually an anthology of Jesus’ teachings, taken from various times and places throughout Jesus’ ministry. Matthew has done us the favor of collecting them and putting them in one place as a convenient guide for those who tried to live as citizens of God’s reign. It was a kind of go-to pocket guide for Christian discipleship.

Last week, Jesus begins by telling us just who his followers were. He knew his audience. He called them:

* The hopeless;
* The grieving;
* The humble;
* Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;
* Those who show mercy;
* The pure in heart;
* The peacemakers;
* Those whose lives are harassed because they live rightly;
* Those whom people insult and harass and about whom they speak all kinds of bad and false things, all because they follow Jesus.

In today’s world, people will call you losers, all because you live under the reign of God. And he was right. The ones Jesus identified as his followers: the poor, the hungry, the peacemakers, the ones about whom people lie and spread rumors, the immigrants, they were the losers of his day. And so too today.

But Jesus goes further in identifying his followers. He calls us the salt of the earth and the light of the world. *The salt of the earth.*  It used to be a fond and frequent phrase for working folks, for ordinary people, for dependable wage-earners. We called these people *the backbone of the nation*.

Of late, the backbone has been in spasm, and the whole nation in agony because of it.

The backbone has a new name now, *the forgotten,* a name given by Donald Trump, elected on the strength of his promise to allay fear. Yet he inflames it, his promise to restore disappearing jobs in an economy so changed that he is like the Pied Piper, playing this tune to lead the charmed to their destruction.

The salt of the earth has risen to the man who says he will *make America great again,* by getting rid of people who do not resemble them, people who are also part of the backbone that keeps America walking, despite their different skin, their different faiths, despite their poverty.

Trump has promised to end terrorism. Yet his Administration leads with its fists, and is resolved to destroy the system we have all relied upon, in the name of returning power to the people.

What rhetoric is this? And how can we rely upon it, when the bullhorn began its public speaking with belligerent lies, claiming the Inaugural crowd was six times larger than it really was. What difference does the crowd size make?  This difference: the megaphone is announcing that lies will, from now on, be the truth of the day.

The gospel for this week offers us Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount: *you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world; a city set upon a hill cannot be hid.*

How the salt is desecrated by the Fearmonger In Chief! How the light dims in the daily tweets of the Pied Potus! And how the City, gleaming alabaster city on a hill that it is, is betrayed by a leader who calls it a swamp and seeks to drain its energy, its history, its confidence, its normalcy.

As people take to the streets, President Trump is not deterred, nor does he intend to change course. It must be up to the opposition in the Senate and House, and it must be up to the Courts, to try to rein in this wildness, this frothing at the mouth, this indiscreet indulgence in untruth. But alas, it does not seem to be in their script, either.

We are not the first nation faced with such problems. During the ascension to power of Adolph Hitler, Pastor Martin Niemoller, who held onto his hope that his government could emerge from its self-created darkness for years, yet he and others in the so-called *Confessing Church,* finally came into open opposition, for which he was arrested. In a sermon just prior to his arrest by the Nazis, Niemoller prophetically spoke of Jesus’ words: “*You are the light of the world*:

*What are we worrying about?  When I read out the names (of church members missing or arrested), did we not think: “Alas and alack, will this wind, this storm, that is going through the world just now, not blow out the Gospel candle? We must therefore take the message in out of the storm and (keep) it safe.”  
It is . . . during these days that I have realized – that I have understood – what the Lord Jesus Christ means when He says: ‘Do not take up the bushel! I have not lit the candle for you to put it under the bushel, in order to protect it from the wind. Away with the bushel! The light should be placed upon a candlestick! . . . We are not to worry whether the light is extinguished or not; that is [God’s] concern: we are only to see that the light is not hidden away – ‘Let your light shine before [the world]!’”*

And Niemoller continued, later in his sermon:

*“The city of God cannot remain hidden. Brothers and sisters, the city of God will not be blown down by the storm. It will not be conquered even though the enemy take its outer walls. The city of God will stand, because its strength comes from on high.”*

In speaking this difficult word – many in the church were goose-stepping behind Hitler – Niemoller stood in the faithful tradition of the prophets and Jesus who spoke out against a government that had gone horrifically askew. And so, we too must. We should not, nor cannot, if we are faithful to Jesus, hide our light. If we are to be salt of the earth, we cannot, nor should not, remain silent.

**Some of us, the old ones of us, remember that chant: The Whole World is Watching.**  We remember it from 1968, from Chicago, from the Democratic National Convention, from the protests in the streets against the war in Vietnam.  The old ones of us (myself included) remember that chant with pain and trepidation.  The world watched as protesters were beaten, as faces were covered with blood, and as ill-prepared protesters acted out their naïve little fantasies of revolution, earning some admiration and much disdain.  I was not in Chicago, but I was in other protesting crowds.  We earned admiration from some and much disdain from others. We earned them. Both.

This is another moment when the whole world is watching. I know very well that this is so. I remember the days when I represented our denomination overseas. They were watching back then, not only as citizens of other countries watching the US, but as the Christian church in Germany and Ghana, and Taiwan, and the Philippines, to name a few, watching the church in the US, to see if we live up to our prophetic responsibilities. The world is watching. Will we who claim to follow Jesus be the people of the Beatitudes? The salt of the earth? The light on a hill? Or will we be bland salt, a people in whom the light has flickered, and finally gone out? For the sake of the world for which Jesus gave his life, be the salt and light. Speak truth to power.