

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Second Sunday of Easter- April 15, 2007

Scripture lessons: Psalm 150 & Matthew 5:13-26

SALT AND LIGHT

On this second Sunday of Easter, we continue our celebration of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. We celebrate Christ's resurrection not as some long ago miracle, but as *the* present reality that gives us new life now, life in confidence that Jesus' way is God's way, God's way that gives us eternal life now and in the world to come. What a ridiculous way of life it is.

We've been reminded of that as we've recently remembered Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In it, he gives us the core of his teaching about God's way, telling us what life is like when God's kingdom comes. He starts it by declaring that the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for righteousness' sake are the ones especially blessed in God's reign. How ridiculous is that? None of those are among the ones we usually think of as blessed.

"Blessed are the self-made because they're masters of their fate and captains of their souls. Blessed are those who never mourn because life always goes well for them. Blessed are those who do their own thing because no one bosses them around. Blessed are those who get while the getting's good because if you don't look out for yourself who will? Blessed are the tough as nails because no one takes advantage of them. Blessed are the impure in heart because they have all the fun. Blessed are those who rule their rivals on their own terms because life is dog eat dog. Blessed are those who never stand up for anything because no one persecutes them." Isn't that more the way we usually think?

Jesus' beatitudes only begin the strangeness of his teaching. We forget how unsettling the rest of his sermon can be only if we ignore what it says. Christian writer and teacher Virginia Stem Owens tells of assigning the Sermon on the Mount to one of her composition classes at Texas A&M University. Her students were to read it and write a personal essay in response. Reading their work reminded Owens of how Jesus' sermon probably came across to most of his first listeners *and* how it likely comes across to most people today who read it for the first time. Her students said, for example: "I did not like the essay 'Sermon on the Mount'. It was hard to read and made me feel like I had to be perfect and no one is." Or, "The things asked in this sermon are absurd. To look at a woman is adultery. That is the most extreme, stupid, unhuman statement that I have ever heard." Or, "The stuff the churches preach is extremely strict and allows for almost no fun without thinking (if) it is a sin or not."

Unfiltered, straight-from-the-gut, I-don't-care-about-Jesus'-reputation responses like those aren't that much different from the ones Christians frequently have given to Jesus' sermon over the years. Unlike those students, we *have* cared that Jesus is the one who's told us these things. But like those young Aggies we've found that *what* he has said is upsetting enough that we usually haven't tried to follow it.

It's not that we've rejected Jesus' teaching outright. Instead, we've usually seen it as so far beyond us that we've interpreted it in ways that take us off the hook. St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, taught that Jesus' statement about committing adultery in your heart when you look at a woman with lust is a counsel of perfection that applies to monks, but not to average Joes. Or Martin Luther taught that Jesus' statement about "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" applies to individuals in interpersonal life, but not to states in international life. Christians, therefore, according to Luther, can be loyal soldiers who follow a state's orders to kill so long as they maintain love for the state's enemies in their hearts. Many German Lutherans thought they did this when they carried out Nazi orders to exterminate the Jews. Or John Darby, the founder of dispensationalist theology on which today's best-selling *Left Behind* series is

based, taught that Jesus' sermon first applied only to the "age of Law" which, according to Darby's system, ended when Jesus died and rose again. Darby said the Sermon on the Mount will apply again after Jesus' second coming, but not now- which is convenient for us.

What we seem to keep forgetting is that there's nothing in Jesus' sermon itself that suggests he doesn't mean for it to apply to all of us always. The Kingdom of God has come near, he says. He calls us to turn to it in repentance and embrace the way of life it offers. His sermon teaches as a matter of fact what that life is like. It's the life God wants and intends for us. It's the life that truly is life, life eternal, life that brings our greatest fulfillment through genuine communion with God. In other words, the Sermon on the Mount is good news. It's gospel. Its vision of life is a means of God's grace.

We fall short of it repeatedly- there's no doubt about that. But God keeps forgiving us and helping us to start over. We start over each time not by watering down what God calls us to be and do, but by reaching up higher and higher to enter more fully into its blessing.

In his continuation of the sermon that is our second Scripture for today, Jesus says that we who've heard the good news of God's kingdom come near are nothing less than "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world". By living the life of the kingdom we *remain* salty and bring out the flavor of life as God means for it to be. By living the kingdom life we *shine forth* with the light that points the whole world to God and the blessing God gives.

It's a life based on God's law, but God's law understood in a way that enables us to live far beyond what Jesus calls the "righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees". The scribes and Pharisees of his day loved God's law, but in a woefully misguided way. They spelled it out for everyone in the form of 613 rules. They bolstered those rules with another 1521 corollaries. Through those 2000 plus rules and corollaries they aimed to give exhaustive guidance on how to live the life God wants for us.

But Jesus says their whole approach is off base. The righteousness they promoted through their understanding of God's law focused on the outward form, but ignored the inward spirit of our life and action. Jesus highlights this by talking about some of the best known and most basic commandments. He begins, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire" (Matthew 5:21-22).

Jesus is a skilled pathologist. He takes something everyone agrees is completely at odds with the way that life is supposed to be lived- namely, murder. He then lays it on the table and dissects it so we can better understand its deeper causes. Murder, Jesus says, is rooted in *anger*. It's therefore necessary to refrain not just from murder in order to live as God intends, but also to root out the anger that ultimately can lead to it.

What kind of anger does Jesus have in mind? It's important to know because too often people have assumed that Jesus condemns *all* anger. It's one of those assumptions that have led many to think that the Sermon on the Mount is hopelessly idealistic because everyone knows everyone gets angry sometimes.

Jesus certainly did. His expulsion of the moneychangers from the temple is probably the best-known example. Confronted by a serious violation of the temple's integrity, he became righteously angry about it, and acted rightly on that anger. But that's *not* the kind he's talking about here.

The Greek that Matthew uses to report Jesus' teaching at this point is in participle form. It means being angry in the sense of an ongoing or continuous action. Jesus is talking about a brooding, simmering, grudge-holding kind of anger. He's talking about one that we nurse, feed, or cultivate. He's talking about an anger that stems from an even more deeply-seated and arrogant contempt for others that leads into the kind of dismissive insults and name-calling he also calls to account in this passage.

The Greek word that our New Revised Standard Version translates in verse 22 as “insult” is “*Raca*”. In Greek, the sound of the word “*Raca*” is meant to suggest the sound we make in clearing our throat as we get ready to spit (on someone). The Greek translated in verse 23 as “fool” is “*moronos*” from which we get our English word “moron”. Jesus is warning us that talking about others with the kind of contempt these words imply betrays an inward spirit that is itself murderous. As such, this sort of talk and the spirit beneath it also need to be rejected just as seriously as murder if we’re to live truly in the love God has made us for.

How might we, the people of Haslett Community Church, be drawn into this kind of wrongdoing? The overtly racist and sexist comments that recently have gotten Don Imus into so much trouble probably are not our style. Yet how easily do we find ourselves becoming snippy, carping, or critical in our comments about and attitudes towards others? “He talks too much. She laughs too loud. Their kids are brats. She smokes like a fiend. He looks like he gets dressed in the dark. They have such funny accents.” How freely do we sneer at others with loose talk about them as twerps, jerks, dorks, nerds, dweebs, jocks, hicks, Neanderthals, PCers, chauvinists, liberals, right-wingers, tree-huggers, fundamentalists, traitors, infidels, terrorists or any other label we use to cut people down to a size that makes us feel superior?

Jesus says that talk and attitudes like these are *not* a minor or insignificant matter. They’re not something we can legitimately defend by saying, “I’m just being honest” or minimize by insisting, “I’m just having a little innocent fun”. They reflect instead an inward spirit that’s murderous, one that needs to be cut out.

Jesus is very practical about this. He lays bare the deeper dimension of what’s at stake in the commandment against murder. He then tells us how to strengthen ourselves against the temptation to break it. He says, “So when you’re offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

Jesus’ point is direct and potent. He says, “Reconcile with others *now*. Go immediately to those who have anything against us, and, as far as it’s in our power, make things right with them. Don’t kid ourselves into thinking that something like religious ritual is more important or that it will magically take care of such things for us. We need instead to go quickly and tend to our essential spiritual business.

Jesus says, “. . . if your brother or sister has something against you . . .” He doesn’t say, “. . . if you have something against your brother or sister . . .” He’s talking here about those times when *we* have done wrong, when we’ve nursed anger against others or insulted them or been contemptuous of them in our hearts. He wants us to understand that the practical means for rooting out the murderous spirit that underlies these wrongs is no great mystery. They simply require that we go without delay to confess and make things right. It’s not easy, but it’s plain true.

When we do, we’re like salt that flavors the world with how God means for things to be. We’re like light that shines forth to show the way to God and to the blessing God gives. When we don’t, we’re like salt that’s become useless and is trampled underfoot. We’re like a lamp whose light is hidden under a bushel.

In teaching these things, Jesus isn’t being wildly idealistic as is often charged. He’s being completely and soberly realistic. He knows God has made us for the joy of a certain kind of life. He teaches us what that life is like and about the love that serves as its foundation. If we damage that foundation with actions that stem from an angry, arrogant, and contemptuous spirit, we have to do the necessary repair work. If we do, we’ll come to know more and more of the blessing of God’s reign. If we don’t, we won’t.

That's nothing but the purest realism. Crazy and hopeless idealism takes over only when we think we can live the kind of life we really want and that God's made us for without having to do the hard, but simple work that love requires. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff