

### **Matthew 5:13-20**

5:13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

5:15 People do not light a lamp put it under the bushel basket; rather they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

5:18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

5:19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

5:20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

### **Sermon: Salty and Bright:**

We've just read a very important text, one that I believe is just as central to our lives as the ones we read last week: Micah's call for justice, kindness and humility, as well as Matthew's version of the Beatitudes. I'm going to attempt to accomplish two things today: First, I want to tell you what I believe this text means, and where it calls us to go. And then, secondly, I want to tell you the response this text provokes for my own life.

Here goes:

Jesus says to all who will listen, our congregation included: "You, *we*, are the salt of the earth. And you, *we*, are the light of the world. And since you, *we*, are salt, then you, *we*, ought to be salty. And since you, *we*, are light, then you, *we*, ought to be bright."

What does Jesus mean by this? I believe this is a statement of calling. Quite simply, we will not live into our purpose – we will not be who we have been created to be – if we choose to abandon and avoid the very qualities that espouse our being. And indeed, the very qualities we have been created to espouse!

Salt is an enhancer. Sprinkle a little on your food here or there, and it reveals the umph, or the flavor burst, in what it's added to. Wow, slice of watermelon, I never knew you could taste like this!

But what good is salt, for any of us, if it always stays in the table shaker or sealed up in the pantry. It's got no value if it's never used.

I think, too, about rock salt. We dump it in our homemade ice-cream makers, because it helps the ingredients to slowly freeze. And this

week, we've put it everywhere to melt snow and ice. Matter of fact, we've used so much salt you can't find it in any local store!

Some of these salt granules live out their purpose; they show themselves, and they work hard. They separate from the batch. Some don't. When the making or the melting is done, all that's left over are a bunch of water-logged pebbles. Salt without saltiness.

I ask you: Is salt really *salt* if it never leaves its container or expresses its saltiness?

Light is everywhere. But Jesus is right. Light doesn't have usefulness when it's hidden. Be careful though. All demonstrative light isn't necessarily purpose-filled light.

Salty salt draws out flavor. So, too, purposeful light draws out life and warmth. Yes, it's certainly true that we can see high beams in our rear-view mirrors. And, yes, we can see stadium lights and bright, blinking commercial signs that disrupt once restful neighborhood scenes. And, yes, Daddy, we can see the abrupt and immediate bright light of drawn shades in our bedroom when you need us to wake up for school in a hurry! There's nothing hidden about any of these lights! But Jesus isn't describing intrusive lights, those that shout and demand to be seen.

Instead, Jesus is talking about light that draws others in. The earth orbits the sun. That means the sun stands still, consistent, proud, bright. "I am here," she says. And each day, she waits for us to turn toward her. And each season, she waits for us to turn a little closer to her warmer side. She draws us in.

Porch lights, and candles in the window, and steeple lights, and even that old Texaco star that once welcomed anxious travelers with empty gas tanks, all have a similar quality. The guiding light, the welcoming light, the homecoming light is sturdy and resolute. It's got no time for scattering; it's all about gathering.

Light will never be light when it is hidden away. Light will only be light when it's shared with others.

Jesus says we are salt and light. That means Jesus says we are all, each and every one of us, a gift to this world.

My daughter Mary Allen has a favorite saying. When there's an experience she really likes, she says, "Oh yeah, baby!" I believe Jesus surveys the crowd this morning, remember he's still proclaiming the Sermon on the Mount, and he looks out over everyone there, and by extension, us as well, and Jesus says, "Oh yeah, baby!"

Every single one of us are a gift. EVERY. ONE. OF. US. But we will only be gifts to this world when we choose to be gifts that are given, and shared, and experienced in this world. Be salt that is salty, Millbrook. Be light that is bright, Millbrook.

The second part of our text offers instruction about how we might live out or express our giftedness.

Torah is the law. Last week, in Micah, the prophet offered a ten-thousand-foot view: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. Jesus often reminds us: love God and love neighbor as we love ourselves.

Torah exists as a guardrail or a hedge to help every person be intentional in avoiding the destructive tendencies that lead to woundedness. Torah exists to foster an ever-maturing mutuality among God, neighbor, and land.

But we struggle with the clinical nature of all the details attached to Torah – we get tripped up on the operating manual. Extremes and polarities begin to develop.

On one end is a rigid *fundamentalism*. The maintenance of the guardrail becomes more important than the wellbeing of the community it's trying to protect. We worship the trellis rather than the rose. For example, healing on Sabbath becomes troublesome. Sure, you've helped your neighbor, but you've done so in defiance of tradition and law.

On the other extreme is a *marginalization* of laws and behaviors. We know, without question, that God is ultimately oriented to a radical grace and hospitality. That's never in dispute, not for one moment.

But our response, in the extreme, can be problematic, *If, IF*, we conclude God's radical grace removes accountability and responsibility for our own destructive actions. For example, we might wrongly infer that because Jesus maintains a sense of community with people who participate in destructive behaviors, Jesus also condones and even endorses our own destructive behaviors. Therefore, Torah has no sense of gravity or bearing for our everyday lives.

Jesus meets the tension of these two extremes, *fundamentalism* and *marginalization*, head on. Jesus does not advocate for an exacting standard that privileges the few and marginalizes the masses.

Righteousness is never, EVER a tool for self-promotion. Jesus also refuses to dismiss the law, not even a letter. Yes, humans do destructive things, and yes, God parents us, even the most destructive people. But that doesn't mean our purpose is destruction.

Jesus, through the application of Torah, wants us to become aware of the destructive things we do to one another, and once awoken to such tendencies, Jesus call us to model, and model intentionally, lives of empathy and compassion that will eventually remove the individual and corporate woundedness we experience.

If we're gonna be salty, Millbrook, we must be enhancers. We must make the love of God seen, and heard, and known in all we do. We must delight when God's umph is manifested in and through our neighbors.

And if we want to be bright, Millbrook, we must be a people who are sturdy and consistent with our love. We've got to be a community that draws others closer together.

And if we want to model Torah with authenticity, Millbrook, we cannot lose our saltiness and our light. Torah isn't ours to store in the cupboard, or place on an ivory tower, its knowledge something to hoard from others. Our living, influenced by Torah, and undergirded in God's Spirit, isn't something to be hidden from the world. Our purposeful lives have the purpose of being shared with others in order that their purposeful lives might also inspire purpose for the neighbors they encounter. Is that enough purposes for you?!?

Salt. Light. Torah. That's the call Jesus provides today. It's one that has offered me a chance for introspection in the past few days.

My work affords me the opportunity to interact with people of very diverse backgrounds. I'm eternally grateful for that privilege. In the past month alone, I've had more than a dozen interactions with Black and Brown colleagues where they've invited me into deeply personal spaces, about deeply substantive, deeply human issues, and they've shared a little something of their lives with me, and the challenges they navigate in a White-centered world. And I am so grateful for their trust, and for their offering of what is wholly sacred and beautiful.

To a person, they've described instances where they've had to veil whole parts of themselves, adapt to environments that insist they act more White, more male, more straight, more prudent, more guarded, less salty, less bright. They've told me about the toll that's had on their bodies, on their minds, on their hearts, on their souls. They carry that, all the time.

But they've also told me about safe spaces, and moments of clarity, and the seizing of their own power, of a liberation that comes with salt and light: things like entrepreneurship, and advocacy, and unbounded worship, and parenthood, and siblinghood, and friendship. Salt and light in the world – THEIR salt and light in the world. Given. Received.

I'm not new to the work of dissecting my privileges and biases, but I'm still late, a whole lot later than I should be. And my learning curve isn't nearly as steep as it needs to be. I think I've been aware for some time of how the isms keep constantly wounding and veiling my friends who don't share in my WASPy, wealthy, Eurocentric status. But I also think I'm starting to discover the great damage such systems are inflicting upon my own heart, mind, soul, and body, and the ways that I'm veiling my own self, and the salt, and the light that's being hidden, not just from own life, but from all the lives I interact with.

We are trained as pastors to love, even people who are hard to love. And hard as I try, I cannot get Will Campbell's words out of head: "We're all (insert expletive here), but God loves us anyway." And, "We must be reconciled to one another."

That means there's often compromise. That means there's often not demanding to have the last word. That means there's a lot of looking past the words, the actions, the tendencies, the annoyances, the dynamics that stir our deepest tensions and simmer our blood beyond boiling, and looking hard, really hard, for the humanity, and the Christ we see in the person across from us, and letting that be our common denominator. And doing it again and again, and again, and again.

And I've been lucky, because as a pastor, I often get to meet people in vital, sacred moments where a desire for reconciliation transcends politics, and power, and privilege, and pride.

But too often, in this very, very polarized world, I'm feeling veiled. Veiled by the isms. Veiled by tradition. Veiled by the hard hand of the status quo. Veiled by the anxiety of how anticipated discomfort and tension will stifle progress or disrupt creature comforts. What do I mean by that? What does this look like?

This week, I was on a call with faith leaders across our city. The topic was how congregations might transform underutilized land into affordable housing. Did you know there are several local congregations already making that a reality? There's not a one of us in this room who believes that affordable housing isn't necessary to the wellbeing of our neighbors. Food sufficiency and childcare, too. We are also all too aware that we sit on unused resources that could address those issues in some significant way. But there's also not a one of us in this room who

doesn't grimace about the work it would entail, or worry about the resources we'd have to give up to make it possible.

For the past few weeks, Phil and I have been taking an online class on hymnody, and how we might find more creative ways to incorporate expansive imagery about God into our music and worship. How we might honor women's bodies and international expressions of faith, or recognize common challenges like grief and mental illness, and Alzheimer's. I don't think any of us oppose the pursuit of such awareness. But how many of us are willing to worship God in new ways? How many of us are willing to give up the safety of what we know for bigger, brighter possibilities?

We're gonna share supper in a few moments. And some of us may even join neighbors for the game tonight. And I'd bet my paycheck that we'll all choose spaces where we agree on what halftime show we're gonna watch, and what we deem to be appropriate behavior from a president, and whether we believe ICE is a dirty word, because we just don't have the energy for another steel-cage death match tonight.

So we keep a veiled peace. And there's not an ounce of salt or light to be found.

Well, I need to make some statements of faith to you today. Hear that: faith. Not politics. Not politeness. Faith. Unveiled faith.

Our neighbors need housing, and food sustainability, and access to childcare, and education, and healthcare, and mental healthcare. They need it now. Because there's no salt and light without them. And as people of faith, we cannot be salty, and we cannot be bright, if we're not resolved to be their advocates.

God is unbounded. Every created being exudes the beauty and possibility of God. Language, expression, and worship that does not reflect the depth of this scope is an injustice and an affront to all we hold dear. God cannot be love, God cannot be reflected in all of us, if God is reduced to a White, warrior, king, subservient to broken systems. When we refuse to be intentional in our language, whether consciously or not, we darken the light of others, and we sully the salt of others.

Here's another faithful statement: I'm watching Bad Bunny tonight. He's amazing. His music and his rhythm are so powerful they transcend language. Not to mention that he got his start in a church choir, that he works tirelessly to support youth in rural areas, that's he's an emblem of pride for millions of Puerto Ricans around the world, that he's staunchly criticized the evils of colonialism, and that he's made it safe for masculinity to be fluid. But also, we live in a nation that's happy to enjoy so many aspects of Latine culture: its food, its rhythms, its sun-kissed lands, it's zest for life. When an emblem of culture headlines the Super Bowl, it's a marker of value and dignity. We signal that we celebrate members of this culture as neighbors in this land, that we freely and gladly offer our Constitution, and welcome in the pews of our faith houses, and seats and influence at our tables. I'm watching Bad Bunny, I'm cheering for him, and all the people he represents, not just because that's a salty and bright response, but also because the world needs his salt and light, and theirs, too.

Finally, I must voice grave concerns about the violent tactics being deployed in Minneapolis, the dehumanizing rhetoric spewing from Washington, and an increasing push for isolationism. It's not okay to keep using force for force's sake, because we keep losing precious lives for senseless reasons. People are never expendable. It's not okay to call people monkeys or to post demeaning tropes. EVER. Stop. It's not okay

to build Towers of Babel. God created us to scatter and be fruitful. Our faith demands peace, and, welcome, and community. Our silence on such matters hides light and tramples salt.

I'm telling you all this, Millbrook, because we must be reconciled. I'm faithing that we are strong enough to hear hard things. I'm faithing that we are strong enough to do hard things. I'm faithing that our love for one another, and that our convictions about God's unbounded love and welcome for the world are as strong, and as faithful, and as readily accessible as we claim they are. I'm faithing that, moving forward, each Sunday, you want to listen, not for what you want to hear, or expect to hear, but rather, for what God is putting on my heart, and all our hearts, to hear.

I know for certain that we will never be reconciled by veiling hard truths and avoiding discomfort. We will only be reconciled by salt and light.

And we ought not be discouraged, Millbrook, because there is good news: we've got both quantities in abundance. We need only marshal the courage to galvanize our resources, to be salt-sprinklers and lantern-carriers. May we be found faithful, and salty, and bright.

Amen.