

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The people gathered to hear Jesus speak have just finished hearing that the world order is not God's order - that the meek will inherit the earth, that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. God doesn't value wealth and power. God isn't impressed by what kind of care you drive or how many hotels you own. God lifts up the lost, the lonely, the peace-seekers, the truth bearers. Those gathered on the hill to listen to Jesus' first public sermon were living under the oppressive regime of the Roman Empire. In a culture where politics and religion were inseparable, the people of Israel struggled to understand how they could be God's holy city and temple could be occupied territory. Different factions of first-century Judaism each had a response as to how to deal with this reality.

The Sadducees thought it best to collaborate and cooperate with the occupying force while the Zealots desired to take up weapons and fight the empire. The Pharisees seem to have been divided with some opting for the sword and others wanting to keep their heads down, not make waves, and engage in deeper private study of the Torah.

Jesus preaches this sermon as the beginning of his ministry, giving some radical answers to these tensions. He rejects the violent agenda of the Zealots when he later calls on the people to love their enemies and to pray for their persecutors. But he is also criticizing the idea of laying low and maintaining the status quo. Jesus calls the people gathered to not just focus on survival and preservation, but to be salt and light in the world.

On the surface, being salt doesn't sound all that exciting. Most of the salt we encounter in our lives is made up of little white granules. They really aren't that impressive. But salt brings out the flavor in foods, it makes foods come alive that would have otherwise seem tasteless and bland. Jesus reminds the people, and us, that the world needs a little flavor. The world needs to be brought to life and saved from being bland and tasteless. Like salt, as disciples we are called to bring out goodness as we live and move in the world. Jesus is calling on us to not be afraid to bring our flavor to the table. Jesus warns against salt losing its saltiness. The only way salt can lose its

saltiness is for it to be diluted in some way. The very nature of salt keeps it from losing its flavor simply with time. We risk diluting our saltiness when we allow things into our lives that are not life-giving. We risk diluting our saltiness when we believe people who say there is something inherently wrong with who we are. When we allow the world to tell us that our voice doesn't matter, or we don't fit in, or ... fill in the blank.

But it is the metaphor of Light that I really want to pay attention to this morning. Jesus tells those gathered and all who seek to bring God's shalom to earth, that they are the light of the world. Let's think about light for a moment. Light allows us to see things more clearly. Light is necessary for plants to grow and flourish. Lighthouses were used to safely guide ships along their journey and keep them from danger. Light from a flame provides warmth and draws people closer.

In this metaphor, Jesus likens the people to lamps that have been lit. When you light an oil lamp or a candle, you don't then hide it away. The whole purpose of lighting the lamp is to bring light to the darkness. God has lit the lamp that is each of us. The source of our light comes from God herself. Why then would we want to hide that light away or make it dim?

The truth is shining a light can be dangerous. It shouldn't be a radical act to proclaim that all people are beloved children of God worthy of dignity and love and yet this message is still met with disdain by some people. Fully embracing one's uniqueness and identity shouldn't be a radical act and yet people who are viewed as different are still met with violence and oppression. But Jesus says "let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to God." Do good in the world, and others will know God through that goodness. Seek love and justice, love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you, and don't be afraid to shine a light into dark places.

As you know, LIGHT is our theme for our stewardship season this year. I think this is such a fitting theme for this church and for this time. This church has been described to me as an oasis, as a safe harbor. And this church is absolutely a light in

the surrounding community. When we each bring our own gifts to this community, whether gifts of money, or gifts of time, the light gets brighter and brighter. This church has both literally and metaphorically saved people's lives. People who felt lost or less than, people who had lost hope, people who had been told that they weren't worthy of love. This place and each of you have shone the light and love of God into the dark and brought hope. It is imperative that we continue to do so and seek to make that light even brighter, even bolder, so it's warmth and glow can be seen and felt by as many people as possible. You are the light of the world. We are the light of the world. That light is already shining within each of you. It's time to let it shine.