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“Salt and Light”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

February 5, 2017

Matthew 5:13-20

Have I ever told you the story of the time I made the worst chicken and dumplings ever? It’s shameful, really. It all started when I attended the memorial service for one of my church member’s mom, Nell. Nell, you see, was a champion chicken and dumplings maker. She was known all around her community for this dish, and apparently, she believed others could prepare it as well as she did, so she shared her recipe freely. At her service, in memory and in honor of her, the family included her famous chicken and dumplings recipe on cards to be shared with those who loved her. I was inspired. “What a wonderful way to honor Nell,” I thought. I would make *her* chicken and dumplings. My son, Tyler, loves chicken and dumplings, and so one evening I set about to surprise him by making his favorite. But there was one problem: I am a lousy cook. I try to do too many things at once and end up overcooking, or undercooking or forgetting to add key ingredients. It was this last one that spoiled the batch this time. I combined the ingredients, rolled out the dough, patiently boiled the water while carving the dough into little dumpling pieces. I was so proud of myself. I prepared the chicken and followed the recipe as closely as I could considering my limited time and ability. When it was done, it looked delicious! Tyler was starving and very excited to have had me make his favorite. We each took a big bite . . . and it was all we could do not to spit it out. It was awful. Nasty, tasteless chunks of flour in our mouths. We poured buckets of salt into the mixture to try to make it better, but to no avail. It was too late. As we unhappily settled for bowls of Ramen noodles, I pored over the recipe to see what I had done wrong. Salt. It was the salt.

Apparently, it makes a big difference *when* you add it. [Don't laugh at me!] It must be added to the dough before it is cooked. Yes, I know that now. But I, in my lack of focus, in my distracted way of cooking, had skipped that essential part. Without the salt in the dough, the batch of chicken and dumplings was inedible. I tried not to cry as I threw it out. I silently begged Nell's forgiveness. Who knew that that one little step of adding salt at the beginning would be the difference-maker for the whole batch? Nell did. And now I do.

Salt, you see, makes a difference.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus follows up his list of blessings, the "Beatitudes," with this lesson on salt and light. The Beatitudes tell the followers of Jesus what the people of the Kingdom look like. They are peacemakers. They are people of mercy. They are the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice. These people of the Kingdom, Jesus proclaims, make a difference in the world because of who they are. The world can taste them the way they taste salt in the dough and can see them the way they see a city built on a hill, or a light on a high lamp stand.

Jesus told the people gathered that day, "*YOU* are salt of the earth!" You who mourn, who are meek, who are merciful, who hunger and thirst for righteousness—you who are pure in heart. *You* make a difference in this world. The world cannot help but notice when you are people of righteousness, people of the kingdom of God.

"You are also," said Jesus, "the light of the world." The world cannot help but notice the good you do and the glory your lives give to God. "You who do what I have asked of you," Jesus is saying, "what the law has always asked of you, you are greatest in the kingdom of heaven. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. *You* are . . .

When the people of God are acting like the people of God, it makes a difference! People notice. Like salt adds flavor and light reveals truth. When the gospel is being lived out every day in our actions and our lives, people notice. The gospel becomes hands and feet in the world and it makes a *difference* to the world!

I don't know about you, but over the last couple of weeks I have had a hard time thinking that anything I am doing is making a difference in the world. It is easy to get frustrated and to despair when faced with constant news of exclusion, bigotry, and neglect of the poor and marginalized. It is easy to be discouraged when we hear of decisions that go against the message of the gospel of love, peace, and welcome and that put the lives of real people at risk.

I think Jesus' message is critically important for us to hear right now. That we—the followers of Jesus—are salt and light in this world—that what we do, the way we act, the message of the gospel we bear out with our lives makes an obvious, critical difference. We may not feel like it on some days, or most days this week, but when we act on our faith and on the love that Jesus has taught us to share with others—especially the least of these—we are making a difference. When we speak out against hatred and bigotry, when we march for education, when we fight to care for the environment, when we protest against the prohibition of refugees, when we work for health care for children, the poor, and the elderly, when we push ourselves to learn more about systemic racism and the history of racism in this country, when we gather for conversation groups with our Muslim brothers and sisters, when we buy extra food for the hungry and fix meals for the homeless, when we tutor, mentor, or teach, when we build houses for those without adequate shelter, when we forgive one another and love in ways that are tangible and sincere and heart-felt, and when we humbly seek to follow in the way Jesus would have us go—this—this is when we are salt and this is when we are light and this is when we are followers of Jesus who did the same and so much more for all God's children.

This congregation lives in many ways as witness to the gospel of Christ that are often neither popular nor in the majority. In this day and age, believe it or not, it is still exceedingly rare to see a welcome statement such as ours in our bulletin and on our website—a statement that welcomes all, no matter race, cultural background, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, economic status or ability. In North Carolina, where HB2 is still on the books, our affirmation of the full humanity of all people is not popular in some corners of the state, and yet we come to it as people of Christ, as those who bear witness to the gospel message of grace

and love, peace and inclusivity. In our nation now, we have a order that keeps refugees out from seven countries—refugees who are seeking asylum, a place of safety from their war-torn homes. Our affirmation of Jesus’ preferential treatment of the poor, stranger, excluded, and marginalized is often not popular or embraced by many. But we are called to be people of the gospel. We are called to live the gospel message so that people know it and see it—as they know salt and see light. Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary writes:

[T]he Gospel does not silence the already oppressed. It does not cast suspicion on those who are other. It does not act out of fear. It does not bar membership. It does not legislate inclusion. It does not look aside and say that God’s earth isn’t hurting. It does not ban the perceived outsider. It does not build walls to keep others out.

No. The Gospel is a decry against empire, against power abused, against imperialism and narcissism and complicity. [I]t is a call to action, a plea for resistance, when others are content to stand on the sidelines. “I don’t know the man” is not option these days. We know Jesus.

And we are called to live like we do. Salt and light.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian, writer and martyr, knew well what was asked of him as a follower of Christ. He reflects on Jesus’ words in Matthew:

The followers of Jesus [he writes] are no longer faced with a decision. The only decision possible for them has already been made. Now they have to be what they are, or they are not following Jesus. The followers are the visible community of faith; their discipleship is a visible act which separates them from the world And discipleship is as visible as light in the night, as a mountain in the flatland.¹

I think it is important to ask ourselves today—In what ways will we be salt and light to the world this week? In what ways will we hunger and thirst for

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 113, as quoted by Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 63.

righteousness? In what ways will we bear the gospel message to the world? The opportunities are endless. May we be as salty and full of light as God calls us to be—today and in all our days ahead.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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