“It’s not about us”

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February 5, 2023

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20

***Isaiah 58:1-9a***

***58 Shout out; do not hold back!  Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion,  to the house of Jacob their sins. 2Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they want God on their side. 3“Why do we fast, but you do not see?  Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. 4You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? 6Is not this the fast that I choose:***

***to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. 9Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  you shall cry for help, and he will say, “Here I am.”***

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

***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 under foot.***

***14“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16In 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.***

***17“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18For 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. 19Therefore,*** ***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. 20For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.***

“[In January of 2015, ] [the American Dialect Society](http://www.americandialect.org/)held its 25th Word of the Year proceedings at its annual conference in Portland, Ore. The lion’s share of attention went to a new category: Most Notable Hashtag. But just as intriguing was the winner in the Most Likely to Succeed category: “salty,” defined as “exceptionally bitter, angry, or upset.”1 Or if you’re like me, you think of a salty old sailor – someone who has been tossed and turned by a life at sea. Like Swashby, from the book Swashby and the Sea that is part of our StoryTime videos on our website. I might think of someone grumpy, or impatient and in a huff. Or maybe someone with just a little too much attitude. Your favorite uncle Joe who was the salt of the earth, on the other hand, was a person who was beloved by all.

For Matthew’s audience, the word “salt” would have evoked many layers of meaning. Some of those are sacrifice, loyalty and covenant fidelity, purification, seasoning and preserving. There was another meaning that I thought was interesting. Eating together was called “sharing salt” and expressed a binding relationship.

Thinking about what it might mean to be salt, what comes to mind? Salt brings life/flavor to something lifeless or bland. Salt makes something more of what it already is. Salt disrupts the status quo and demands more; salt has a little kick to it. Salt doesn’t allow something to stay the way it is.

In all of these ways, salt **interacts with other**. Suggesting that the disciples, and the crowds that were overhearing are the salt of the earth was suggesting that they had a lot of responsibility. Followers of Jesus would have a mission that is outside of themselves. Salt isn’t anything on its own. Salt just is. The value of salt is the interaction is has with something else. Being the salt of the earth according to Jesus means bringing our lives of faith to bear for someone else’s wellbeing and betterment.

This is exactly the kind of thing Isaiah was complaining about. The people fast in order to be closer to God, but only because they want God on their side. Not to be closer to God and work for God’s ways in the world. They fast but God doesn’t seem to notice but it’s because they are fasting for their own interests, not those of others. Isaiah says,

***“they ask of me righteous judgments; they want God on their side. [they say,] 3“Why do we fast, but you do not see?  Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” and God responds, “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. 4You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?***

Using Jesus’ terminology, it’s as if they want to be salt, but not be the salt for the world. Isaiah continues and we hear words similar to the words of the prophet Micah that we read from last week.

***6Is not this the fast that I choose:   
    to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. 9Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  you shall cry for help, and he will say, “Here I am.”***

All of this also goes, for Jesus pronouncement about light. Being a follower of Jesus’ means that you are the light of the world. Not just for your friends and family, your crowd, your club, your own life. If we are followers of Jesus, we are a light for wherever there is darkness, anywhere in the world. “This little light of mine” isn’t so that I can walk and not be afraid. That would mean that my light is only for me. Being salt, being light, is not about us. Salt only functions when it is added to something. A light exists in order to make visible what is not visible; to show what is hidden; This little light of mine is so that when I sit with my friend who is suffering, he or she is not in the dark. This little light of mine is so that when there are no words to comfort my neighbor, at least we have light. Remember the Tom Bodett, Motel 6 commercials? “We’ll leave the light on for ya’.” A light in the distance represents welcome, home, arrival, safety.

The kids song “This little light of mine” is cute, a little nostalgic, may make kids think of safety, or doing their best, be a shining light – good girl! Good boy! Nice job! If we sang that song now, we would probably smile, maybe we’d enjoy images of kids or ourselves as kids singing the song. We’d look at each other with a knowing look of sweetness.

Like many other childhood things, the adult version of those lessons comes with more. Being that light comes with a lot of responsibility, just like being salt does. Jesus tries to explain this too. *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 under foot. A lamp under a bushel basket is useless.*

Today’s text is in the midst of the season of Epiphany. This is a season of revelations. Jesus began his sermon on the mount with the beatitudes, and will continue with the teaching portion of the sermon, for the next two whole chapters of Matthew. Today’s text is this interlude explaining more about what can be expected of a disciple, knowing that the crowd is also overhearing the words. It’s as if this beginning of the sermon on the mount serves as a disclaimer. Ok disciples, here’s the setup. These are the kinds of people who are blessed. Here are the ways you will be expected to live. The third section of the text for today marks the beginning of the teaching section of the sermon. Also a bit of a disclaimer, Jesus reminds them that nothing he teaches will be against the law or the Prophets, what would have been known as Scripture at that time. This is important to us as we remember that Jesus came to fulfill the law not abolish it. This fulfillment is important to Matthew. Jesus doesn’t just do what the law says and the Prophets say, and he doesn’t bring a new interpretation to anything; his teachings are not just a summary of the scripture. Fulfillment implies a continuation not a break and change in direction.

We too, by seeking to be salt and light for others, by using our faithful lives looking outward, we too are a part of the fulfillment of Scripture that Jesus came to bring.

Let’s pray.

1<https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-salty-word-with-a-promising-future-1421427784>