

Salty Language

Matthew 5:13-20

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A Sermon for People of All Ages
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I.

I wonder what it was like to be there the day Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount. How high do you think the mountain was?

Probably not very high. It was probably more of a hill, a long sloping hill with grasses swishing in the breeze.

At least that's how I've come to think of it.

I wonder what the weather was like.

Let's hope it was warm and sunny since a lot of people came to hear Jesus speak.

I don't know about you, but if it's rainy and windy and cold, I'm less likely to hike up a mountain to hear someone speak, even if it's Jesus.

The way Matthew tells the story, we might imagine three different groups of listeners. You could think of these groups as three concentric rings.

The closest ring of listeners is made up his new disciples, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew as well as the brothers James and John.

There may have been more disciples, but these are the only ones we know by name at this point in Matthew.

The second ring of listeners is the crowd. These are the many people - children and adults, who have been following Jesus from town to town as Jesus heals those who are mentally or physically ill.

The people who are follow him are peasants - farmers and fishers and craftspeople, mothers and fathers, and children of all ages.

They don't have a lot of money - and of the money they do have, they must give a large part of it to the Romans who are in charge of everything.

There is a moment when Jesus sees the crowds following him and he decides to go up on the hill to teach them.

He sits down to teach, as teachers would do at that time.

When he speaks, he speaks to his disciples, but also to the people of all ages who have followed him there and strain their ears to hear what the great compassionate healer has to say.

And can you guess who the third ring of listeners might be?

Matthew is writing about 50 years after Jesus died, was resurrected, and ascended into heaven.

So, Matthew is writing his story for the third ring, his own church community, and the churches that grew out of it over the centuries, including our little church, here in Sebastopol, and our little church, now, at the beginning of 2017.

When we hear these words, we are sitting with the disciples, we are listening with the crowd.

What does Jesus' voice sound like? Does he have to shout?

Does he use his hands when he speaks?

Is he funny? Is he serious? Does he look at people when he's talking?

I don't know, but I'll bet you have picture in your mind of what it was like.

II.

Jesus begins his sermon with blessings.

We heard about these blessings, or "Beatitudes," last week.

Imagine he was looking around the crowd and offering blessings to those he saw – the poor, the sad, the small, the exhausted, the kind, the innocent, those working for peace, and those who were getting into trouble working for peace.

Right at the end of his many blessings, Jesus changes the way he's speaking.

He uses a little word that makes a big difference. The word is: "you."

And he uses this little word not to tell his listeners what to do, but to remind them who they are.

"You are salt," he says.

In the ancient world, salt was used for many different purposes.

The purpose we usually think of is to add flavor to food.

And flavor is important. If you've ever tried to eat a bar of unsweetened chocolate, or drink a bottle of vanilla extract, you know what I'm talking about.

Smells great. Tastes horrible.

But salt was also used to preserve food in a world hundreds of years before the refrigerator.

And it was used to fertilize soil, to clean, to purify, and to make a promise.

And good salt was a valuable thing to have – it's the root of our word "salary" today.

When Jesus says, "you are the salt of the earth," he is talking about something that is very small but which has great worth.

Just a pinch of salt can make the difference between a bland broth and a sumptuous soup.

And how does it do that? Not just by making it saltier.

The wonder of salt is that it enhances the other flavors in food, it brings out the taste of the bean and the onion and the cilantro.

"You are the salt of earth," Jesus says, "you who seek to follow me, you who hear my words, you who call yourselves the church."

Our joyful work as the followers of Jesus, our exciting work as the church, is to enhance other flavors, to spice up the blandness, to make the world more tasty and appealing and beautiful.

Take a moment and look around you. Go ahead. You are surrounded by salty people.

Turn to your neighbor and let them know, "you are salt."

Turn to another neighbor. Touch 'em lightly and say, "you are salt of the earth."

Now tell 'em this: "Shake your salt shaker!"

And now, altogether, let's say, "Mmm mmm," and "That tastes good."

This week you can tell your friends you got to use some salty language in church today.

III.

But Jesus uses more than salty language.

He isn't done reminding his listeners who they are.

He uses that little word again, saying "You are the light of the world."

Again, light can be a little thing - "this little light of mine" - but a thing which illuminates a darkened space much larger than itself.

Jesus paints a picture of city at night, a city full of lights, guiding the way of a weary traveler, acting as a beacon of life and activity and safety and community.

Jesus says, "You can't hide a city like that."

Let your light shine, Jesus says, for that is the role and the purpose of light.

It would be absurd to light a lamp and then cover up the light with something.

That would defeat the purpose of lighting the lamp in the first place.

In fact, don't just stick in a corner either.

Instead, take the lamp and put it on a stand in the middle of the room so that it can give light and a feeling of warmth to all the shadowy corners.

Turn to a new neighbor and say "Neighbor, oh neighbor. You are light. You are the light of the world. Don't hide yourself away. You are made for shining."

And together we can sing, "Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine."

IV.

I wonder what the crowd, including Jesus' disciples, was thinking at this point.

I wonder how they were feeling.

I imagine they were sensing that Jesus saw and knew and understood them deeply.

That he valued them deeply, reminding them that they are precious in God's sight.

I imagine that they were remembering who they were – not poor, sad, exhausted peacemakers – but salt of the earth and light of the world, little things that flavor and shed light on the world, making it more beautiful, not just for themselves, but to everyone in the house.

It's easy to forget this, isn't it?

Easy to forget when we consume hundreds of ads a day that tell us we are what we buy and that we will never have or be enough.

Easy to forget when kids at school or colleagues at work or family members tease or dismiss or ignore us.

Easy to forget when the news is so dire and disturbing and distracting.

Easy to forget.

Until we put ourselves into that crowd on a hill long ago and far away.

In that crowd, we remember who we are and why we do what we do, why we seek to do good.

Not for prestige, not to climb the social ladder, not to make more money, not so people will like us, not so that we'll feel less guilty, not because it will get us into a good college.

No, we do good because that is who we are, that is how God made us, who God made us to be, a little salt that adds a lot of flavor, and a little light that shines well beyond itself.

Find one more neighbor and let them know, "You may be small, but you make a big difference."

Amen.