

5th Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon 2.1.17

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20

Here's a joke. What's brown and sticky?

A stick.

Here's another one. What's salty? Salt. If it's salty, then it's salt. If it's not salty, then it's not salt. Salt can't lose its saltiness. So, when Jesus says that you're the salt of the earth (you, whoever is listening to him as a disciple, which means *you*): when Jesus says that you're the salt of the earth, and then warns of what might happen if you lose your saltiness, he's speaking in absurdities.

It wouldn't be for the first time—his speaking in absurdities. And, given that this is but the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, it isn't for the last. He'll speak in absurdities a whole lot in coming verses, in coming chapters. According to Matthew and according to the parables Jesus is remembered to have told in coming months, but especially in the last week of his life as he occupied the Temple with his friends and picked fights with the priests of various sorts, he would speak in absurdities a whole lot.

An absurdity: that which is wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate. Like that the laborer who shows up for the last hour of a day's work would receive the same reward as the one who'd worked all day. Like that the kingdom of God is as mustard, taking root as the smallest of seeds but growing into the most unruly of plants, crowding out everything that isn't mustard. (And don't be fooled that Jesus calls it a tree, even the mightiest of trees, because mustard isn't a tree, it's a bush, a tangled bramble, a weed.) Absurdities: like that there will be a great judgment at the end of the age, and this will result in some among us getting cast out where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, all the while the central call of the gospel is to bring into blessing all who are cast out—as if those condemned then become those who should be blessed. Absurd: as soon as the gospel justifies your condemnation, that same gospel demands that you be showed mercy and be blessed.

Jesus brings a gospel of the absurd into a world of the reasonable and rational, a world in which the end we each meet is just and deserved—and it's enough to make you crazy, to make you wonder how we're supposed to proceed.

Are we to *do* the gospel for God's sake, or is God doing it regardless of us? Because to say that we're salt—the salt of the earth—is to declare something unconditionally. This isn't "You might be salt, if..." or "You could be salt, if..." There are no qualifiers or qualifications. Apparently, this is simply so, or hearing the Sermon on the Mount makes this so. What's more, there are no ways to opt out of our essential saltiness. Yes, if you lose your saltiness, you're to be thrown out and trampled under foot. But salt doesn't lose its saltiness, so if you're salt then you'll be salty, and that's that.

As to what that is, what it is to be salt—that's just as puzzling, not so straightforward. Salt, as a thing unto itself, was and is powerful—though powerfully good or powerfully bad is a matter of intent and context. Salt is a most common seasoning, has been for millennia. Indeed, according to the book of Job, "that which is tasteless" can hardly be "eaten without salt."

Salt is also a food preservative, as in salted fish or salted meats. So, particularly in the days prior to refrigeration, salt was absolutely essential for life beyond subsistence farming. Perhaps for this reason, salt came to have religious uses, as in offerings of sacrifice made in the Temple. All such offerings were to be salted so to be purified, which is to say that salt is associated with purity and purification.

For the reason of this deep value, salt was used as payment for labor and in the marketplace, our word "salary" finding its root in the word for salt. It's important to note that salt wasn't rare in the Ancient Near East. The Dead Sea was indeed "dead" for its being so saline, so salty. The value of salt, then, didn't come from its being rare—as in the case of gold or diamonds, but from its being essential.

All this said, though, salt was also potentially dangerous. When a king wanted not only to conquer a people but also to destroy their way of life, he had his army salt the land, thereby making the land unproductive, unable to sustain life. And, as it happens, there are five references in the Hebrew Bible to salt associated with the destruction of life and the laying waste to a land. Really, it was quite a common practice: to "raze a city and sow it with salt."

So, what might Jesus have meant when he said of those first disciples, "You are the salt of the earth"—this, which he said, by extension, to all disciples yet to come in centuries hence, indeed to all the church: "You are the salt of the earth."

It might come as a surprise to hear that the Lord God, according to the Bible, is as critical of “religion” as the likes of Bill Maher is, or the likes of Christopher Hitchens was. It’s commonplace these days to think there are two sorts of people in the world as regards religion: those who are for it and those who are against it. As if all religious practice is beyond evaluation and critical engagement, as if all religious practice is either categorically good or categorically bad, our conversation around religion is for the most part stupid and shallow. This, because the intelligentsia by which cultural phenomena are otherwise measured has mostly abandoned religion as such a cultural phenomenon worthy of critical engagement.

I listen to a weekly podcast on culture featuring a panel of three very smart critics. They discuss things high and low — movies, music, articles, trends. Of the three, none has any lived experience of practicing a religion, so none can bring anything but a modern, secular frame to what they discuss. It’s shocking when you think about it, that a major source of cultural artifacts over the centuries — namely, religion, and more specifically the Christian faith — they none of them have any lived experience of. What’s more, they have no notion that they should have such an experience in order to be considered culturally literate, that a panel concerning human culture absent that is really missing something.

I listened to a panel discussion of journalists who were gathered to discuss how the media should cover the new president, and as these four intelligent, experienced, astute students of our society puzzled over and parsed out *what on earth* is happening, not one could speak to how American religious practice, or practices, might have contributed to what on earth is happening.

Really, among the “elite,” there’s this collective assumption that anything and everything religious should just be dumped into a dustbin. So, there’s the pile, where the Archbishop of Canterbury and some snake handlers and the faculty of Duke Divinity School and Joel Osteen are all lumped together as irrelevant and benighted.

I say all this because I don’t think this is merely unfortunate. I say all this not because, as a “religious” person myself, I’m resentful of this “elite” presumption. I say all this because I think our collective inability to engage critically religious practice in its many, many forms is a contributing factor as to why we in the United States are where we are — amidst a new presidential administration that, having picked plenty of fights with plenty of people in plenty of situations over these last but fifteen days, seems most fundamentally at war with facts and

reality itself. To fall in line, then, with this administration demands a certain mindset, a habit of mind—cognitive dissonance to a degree that I know I can only barely sustain, not without long, daily naps.

As to where such cognitive dissonance might best be learned: I suspect it's in leaned in church, in congregations and communities that are Biblicist in orientation. After all, the Trump Administration enjoys its strongest support among white churchgoers.

Biblicist: a once-Biblicist scholar, who is now Catholic (and who wants *very much* not to be taken as a liberal), describes this as “a theory about the Bible that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability,” and he's starting to go public about his sense that this is false doctrine.

Exclusive authority, infallibility, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability: it's Biblicism that many evangelical churches demand of their members, and it's Biblicism that's taught in much homeschooling curricula. It's Biblicism that's given rise to books with titles such as *Biblical Principles for Starting and Operating a Business*, *Cooking with the Bible: Recipes for Biblical Meals*, *The Bible Cure for Cancer*, and *Queen Esther's Secrets of Womanhood: A Biblical Rite of Passage for Your Daughter*. And, if none of these specifically meets your need, there's always *Bible Answers for Every Need* and *Bible Answers for All Your Questions*.

I have to be honest: it all strikes me as laughable. I don't know why the Bible is so put upon. My faith has never been so demanding of the Bible, so to see the folly of this assertion and project is easy for me. But I'm “friends” on Facebook with a young woman who emerged from such a Biblicist bubble in the upper Midwest. Very active in posting, she's now the conscience of my newsfeed. In the wake of “Muslim ban” enacted last week, she wrote: “Christians: Deafening Silence,” taking issue with the apparent fact that none of the people whom she knew to be “Christian” seemed to care about the fact that there's no room for refugees at the particular inn. A friend of hers who also grew up in that same bubble, wrote, “It's why I haven't been to church [in years.] Everything I was taught there was a lie.” Not laughing anymore: it breaks my heart.

Thus, the intelligentsia will wonder at the Trump voter, and they'll think in terms of economics and job opportunities. (Capitalists that we are, we simply can't imagine anything

more important than money). Or they'll think in terms of level of education, or in terms of partisan political ideologies. And no one will have the curiosity, to say nothing of the capacity, to consider the way Christian truth-claims have been used in many churches to deceive rather than to reveal, to control rather than to liberate, to convince the faithful not to believe their own experience (their own lyin' eyes) but instead to accept talking points even though they're felt also to be false. They'll have neither the curiosity nor the capacity because they assume that this is what the life of faith is, full stop: deception, control, doctrine divorced from lived experience, from facts and reality. Nothing to critique here because it's all just ridiculous, utterly benighted.

Meanwhile, we need look no further than the prophetic text for this morning to see that critical engagement with religious practice is as old as the Living God has been revealed in time. Really, we need look no further to see that God himself isn't always so thrilled with religious people. The Israelites, it seems, late into their period of exile, were excellent at performing their religion—fasting and humbling themselves, bowing their heads and wearing sackcloth even when it wasn't the Day of Atonement. But all this did nearly nothing for actually transforming their living. They continued to exploit their workers, and to quarrel amongst themselves. They continued to serve their own interests, and to strike out against one another.

“But is this not the fast the Lord God would choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to share bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your land and communities—*our* land and communities?”

I participate in a weekly lectionary study group in Stockbridge for local mainline clergy. We read this passage last week, and decided we wouldn't even have to preach a sermon. The text hardly needs interpreting. “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil; if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noon day.”

There *is* an interpretive crux here, though—which is to say, there is a moment in the text where the meaning isn't clear, where further thought is required. There's the question as to cause and effect when it comes to us and God, earning our grace or having it freely given to us. If we do righteously, then will God attend to us? If we do what's right, will God then hear

us when we cry? And, conversely, if we don't do what's right, will God then ignore us, withdraw from us, abandon us?

That's certainly what it sounds like, at least according to Isaiah. But when the question is considered in the context of the absurdities that Christ called forth, the answer seems to be something a little different, something less linear and more immediate: that it is *in* the act of removing the yokes of the oppressed that God is most present; it is in sharing food with the hungry that God is most near. This is to say that it's not a cause-and-effect thing but is about the very nature of God. If God is love, then acting in love is when God is most near. If God is charity, then charitable acts are the full engagement of God. If the Lord is freedom and justice, then in freeing others and in seeking after justice we are in communion with God. There's an immediacy here that goes deeper than cause-and-effect, that fills and transforms more earthbound notions of our getting what we deserve.

Most generally, though, there's the clarion claim that religious people aren't necessarily living according to God's will, aren't necessarily representative of God's nature or reflective of God's will. No, we need to do more than just say the right words or confess the right creed or read the Bible in just the right way—because, if we of the church are the salt of the earth, that's (yes) an essential fact about us but it's one that can be put to various purposes, whether for the preservation of life or as the guarantor of destruction. It really could go either way.

More follows, of course. This is the Sermon on the Mount, so Jesus has a lot more to say. But the great challenge of preaching on Jesus' preaching is that each utterance suggests great depths to wonder more about. But our familiarity with much of what he had to say makes it so we can't really hear it—not fully and truly. Common wisdom about preaching is that there are some stories and passages from the Bible that, if you read them in worship, you have to then preach on them—the story of Adam and Eve, the story of “doubting” Thomas. Otherwise we'll all go on thinking we know exactly what the story or passage means. But, of course, to think we know exactly what anything means when it comes to God is foreclose on the full depths of truth. Plus, there's the likelihood that what we think we know is simply wrong.

This isn't the sermon I wanted to preach today. I wanted to do something beautiful, not didactic; something suggestive and poetic, not explanatory and critical. Lord knows I

could use some beauty, some poetry, something transcendent rather than boots-on-the-ground. Maybe you could use that too. So rest assured, I'm listening for it. Maybe soon. Maybe soon.

Thanks be to God.