

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Last week we began reading Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes—the startling announcement that God's kingdom does not operate the way the kingdoms of this world do, and that those the world overlooks are the very ones God names as blessed. Today we continue with that sermon. And because this is the last Sunday we'll hear from Matthew 5 this year, I want to take the whole chapter into account today so we can hear what Jesus is really saying to his disciples, and just as importantly, what he is not saying. And that will set us up nicely for the beginning of Matthew 6, which is the text we read every year on Ash Wednesday.

So I'm going to talk about three things in Matthew 5. Two of them are in our reading today. Between them, I'll give you a sense of where the rest of the chapter goes, and along the way we'll consider how all of this speaks to our lives of faith and to the mission of the church.

The first thing I want to lift up here is the first thing Jesus says. "You are the salt of the earth." It's so familiar, you might have stopped wondering what Jesus meant by that, unless you thought he meant what we mean today when we say someone is "salt of the earth" – that they are down to earth, decent, and reliable. But that is *not* what Jesus means here. Salt in the ancient world had many uses, but the primary use was to preserve food from spoiling: meat, fish, and vegetables. We still use salt this way, but unless you pickle your own vegetables, you're probably not using salt this way at home. It's done at a factory, or a packing plant. It's used to make sausage and bacon, corned beef, pastrami, and smoked salmon. It's also used to make cheese. But in the ancient world salt was used at home kind of like we use our refrigerators and freezers today – to preserve and extend the life of food. And because of this particular ability of salt, it was also used in making covenants. It was symbolic of the intent of the parties of covenants to keep the agreement being made, that the deal would hold for a long time. So if you connect this claim of Jesus to what he talks about in the second half of our reading today—that not one stroke of the law will pass away—it becomes clear that Jesus is not discarding God's commandments. He is insisting that their true intent be preserved. Yes, in the Beatitudes, Jesus was turning things upside down from the way we're used to thinking about them, but no, that did not mean that God's laws, and particularly the intent behind those laws, was undermined. Because those laws were already addressing a world that we humans had upended from its original intent.

That is why Jesus wants the disciples' righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Those are the people who study and debate and try to apply God's law – to make it useful in daily life, both in the public and private spheres. Because it turns out that what they end up doing is coopting God's law for their own purposes, making God's law manageable so that they can tick off a list of obligations and get on with their own agendas. And just so we don't go there, let's be clear that this is not a particular trait of Jewish religious elites. It is a common trait that we all share as human beings who are in captivity to sin and cannot free ourselves.

This is what Jesus is up against. So, in the rest of Matthew chapter 5 he goes about making the law much harder to manage. He goes through specific laws and pushes beyond the letter to their real intent. "You have heard it said..." he'll begin, and then continue, "but I say to you..." So, "you have heard it said, 'You shall not murder'... But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister ... or if you insult them" you have broken the law. "You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery'... but I say to you" that if you look at someone with lust you have broken the law. "You have heard it said 'You shall not swear an oath falsely'... but I

say to you” don’t swear oaths at all. In other words, don’t ever lie, not just when you’re under oath. Let your yes be yes, and your no be no. Tell the truth at all times. It is a particular indictment of our times that we try to get public figures to testify under oath before congress, and public figures resist that so strongly, because lying has been so normalized. Jesus makes the law harder and harder to keep, but also harder to evade, until he finally forbids revenge and calls us to love our enemies. And then, just in case we didn’t catch on, he ends the chapter with this: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Jesus leaves us with no illusions that we can manage the law, undo our sinfulness, or fix what is broken in the world. The rest of Matthew’s Gospel then takes us to the cross and then to the empty tomb as the solution to the impossible bind we are in, which is where we are headed as we prepare for the seasons of Lent, the Great Three Days, and the Easter season beyond. It’s almost like the folks who put together our lectionary meant to help us with that!

Okay, now we’re ready to get back to our reading today for one more thing to notice. If salt loses its saltiness, it’s not worth anything and it gets thrown out. But how can salt lose its saltiness? In our experience it can’t, because the salt we’re used to is pure sodium chloride. But in the ancient world salt was impure, and often mixed with grit, so that the sodium chloride could wash out of it and there would still be something there. And that would be experienced as salt that had lost its taste, it’s saltiness. And so here is the connection to our reality. We are all of us, individually and collectively as a community, a mixed bag. Jesus compared the church to a field of wheat and weeds, a mixture of good and bad. Luther talked about us being simultaneously saints and sinners. Sinners because of the state of the world we are born into, saints because of God’s love for us and God’s determination that sin not be our destiny. So if we are salt and lose our saltiness, if we are just tasteless grit, how can our saltiness be restored? Only by the grace of God and a work of new creation. “You are salt,” Jesus says to the disciples, and to us. “You are salt because I say so.” God’s word, in other words, creates what God speaks. So, we the church remain salty by continuing to speak the creating and sustaining word of God into our lives, by preserving the faith that has been passed onto us, gathering regularly around God’s gifts of word and sacrament, and being resalted for life lived as blessing and grace on behalf of the world God loves.

And that’s where the light part comes in. When we are salt we are also light, showing forth God’s love in word and deed to all who continue to walk in darkness – which is also us, because of our mixed nature, but never only us. So let us rejoice in who God has promised us we are in Holy Baptism, and as we said to Elaina Lynette a few weeks ago, “let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.