

“The Salt and Light of Resistance”
Matthew 5:13-16
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
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Last week we explored what we call the “Beatitudes” – Jesus’ words that turn upside down our understanding of what it means to be blessed. We were confronted by God’s preferential option for the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden, and God’s honor not just toward them but also toward those who work for justice – those who seek the well-being and wholeness of all people – those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Jesus was clear that being “blessed” doesn’t mean that life will always be easy. He told his disciples that people would revile them and persecute them and utter all kinds of evil against them falsely on his account. And then he used two metaphors to illustrate what it looks like to follow him. He told his followers they were the salt of the earth and they were the light of the world. And that puzzles me. It puzzles me because salt and light are such good things – things everyone needs – things that add value to life. They would hardly seem to be the sort of things that would get followers of Jesus reviled or persecuted or demeaned. Or would they?

Let’s start with salt. We love salt, don’t we? We are accustomed to having plentiful salt in our kitchens – table salt and Kosher salt and sea salt and flake salt and pink salt and gray salt and fleur de sel and smoked salt and the list goes on. We are accustomed to enjoying meals made tasty by the addition of salt, and we struggle when the doctor says “enough”. Salt just makes things taste better. In Jesus’ day, salt would have been used not only to season food but also as a preservative and even for temple offerings. We read in Leviticus (2:13) that grain offerings were to be seasoned with salt as a sign of a covenantal relationship with God, and in Exodus (30:34-35) that temple incense was to be salted as a sign that it was set apart, dedicated and pleasing to God.

Salt has even been used over the ages as a disinfectant. In the ancient world, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans used salt to clean wounds – from minor sores to battlefield injuries – because it reduced infection and promoted healing. Have you ever gotten salt in a cut in your finger while you were fixing dinner? Then you know that salt stings. When the wound is big enough, putting salt on it can be agonizing, as enslaved people knew all too well.

You see where I’m going, don’t you? We live in a wounded world – a world that is being torn open by hatred and injustice and oppression. Our world is bleeding, and we who walk in the way and in the spirit of Jesus are salt in the wound. The principalities and powers of the world wield their whips to try to control the people, but then we show up with healing energy that defies them; with a message of transformative love that is stronger than hate; with voices crying out for righteousness – for justice – for the dignity of all people. We show up in Minneapolis and Shepherdstown and Charleston; we show up at City Council meetings and County Commission meetings and school board meetings and in the halls of Congress. We protest by marching and by standing on street corners. And as we do so, we remember Jesus’ words, “Blessed are you when

people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” Because before salt in a wound heals, it hurts.

And then there’s light. We are the light of the world, Jesus says, and light, like salt, is a very good thing. Light makes life possible. In the first words of Genesis, God speaks light into being, and suddenly the world can grow and breathe and flourish. Without light, life as we know it could not exist. As our Quaker siblings remind us, our light is reflected light – the light of God, made known in Jesus. God’s light dwells within every one of us. And so we shine that light as we walk in the way and in the spirit of Jesus: when we do what is right: when we tell the truth; when we live in hope that the realm of God is near.

So again we have to ask why, when it seems that shining the light of God would be a good thing, would people revile us and persecute us and utter all kinds of evil against us falsely? Jesus suggested the answer in a conversation with a religious leader named Nicodemus.¹ He said that while light has come into the world, people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. Those who do evil, he said, hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.²

That rings as true now as it did in Jesus’ day, doesn’t it? We’re seeing the reality of his words borne out every day, not just in Minneapolis, but in towns and cities across the nation and, indeed, the world. Cell phone cameras are shining light on evil. People bearing witness to abusive government actors are shining light on evil. Reporters writing what they have seen are shining light on evil. And we see the response. Jesus was right. Those who do evil hate the light so that their deeds might not be exposed. We shouldn’t be surprised when light-shiners, truth-tellers, and witnesses to evil are reviled, and persecuted, and even killed.

Jesus went on to say that “people do not light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.” And so in that familiar protest song, “This Little Light of Mine,” one of the traditional lines goes “hide it under a bushel, NO! I’m gonna let it shine.” But let’s be honest. We’ve probably all experienced the human impulse to hold back our light out of fear or exhaustion.

There are, indeed, risks in walking in the way and in the spirit of Jesus. His first followers knew that first hand, as they saw him executed by the Roman empire and then as they, too, suffered persecution and death. Challenging the empire, then and now; standing up to abusive power; saying no to imperialism; honoring and blessing the vulnerable; welcoming the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee; working for justice – all that we do in the name of Jesus comes with risks.

But risks are not the end or even the most important part of the story. We make a mistake if we focus on risks but forget about the blessings that are ours as we walk in the way of Jesus: the purpose and joy we experience; the God-given peace that goes beyond human understanding; the courage rooted in love that empowers us: the hope that emboldens us; the sense of belonging that comforts us. At the heart of our faith is our belief that the realm of God is coming – is, indeed, already here – as we live the way Jesus showed us – the way he taught us. We are the salt of the earth, not only disinfecting the earth’s wounds, but seasoning it and preserving it and healing it. We are

¹ John 3:19

² John 3:20

the light of the world, shining our light not only on evil but also on the path of those who are stumbling in darkness, unsure where or even who they are, so that they might find their way.

And we are salt and light in community with one another. We reflect the light of God individually, but when we come together, we shine even more light on our wounded and woeful world. In an age where empathy and kindness are under attack, we embrace them, acknowledging that we don't live for ourselves alone, but for others – for the world at our front door as well as the world in Gaza and Ukraine and Somalia and the ends of the earth. The world desperately needs the salt and light that God offers through us – salt and light that, together, melt the ice in human hearts, the ice in the world, and even ICE in Minneapolis.

Let the church say, Amen.