

*Your True Identity*  
**A Sermon on Matthew 5:13-20**  
**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**February 9, 2020**

**Introduction**

Today's text is a bridge between the Beatitudes, which we talked about last week, and the Antitheses, which we will cover next week.

Jesus pours out high praise to his listeners. You are the salt of the earth, a city on a hill, the light of the world. Jesus is saying these words to the disciples, and the church ever since has understood itself as standing in the disciples' shoes.

He is telling us what our core identity is: witnesses to the kingdom of God.

**First Move: Salt and Light**

Today's text immediately follows the ninth Beatitude. The first eight Beatitudes are in the third person. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the pure in heart. The ninth Beatitude shifts to the second person plural. "Blessed [are] *you* when they mock you and persecute you and say every evil, telling lies against you because of me." A blessing falls on those who are persecuted for following Jesus. Suffering will come if you embrace the values of the kingdom. It will bring you into conflict with the status quo. There is joy in this suffering because you know that you are helping to build the kingdom by provoking a response.

Today Jesus bestows a new identity on the disciples who are persecuted for following him: You are salt and light.

Salt loses its saltiness when it becomes mixed with other elements. It becomes useless. You might as well throw it out.

Salt is not valuable in and of itself. Martin Luther said, "Salt is not salt for itself; it cannot salt itself." Salt helps bring out the flavor of food. In the same way, the disciples' role is not to serve themselves. They are seasoning for the whole earth. They bring out the best of the earth. If they accommodate themselves to the world instead of to the kingdom, they cannot bring out the best in the world.

Matthew has a more positive of the world than the Gospel of John does. The earth is God's good creation. It is the earth that has value. The whole earth is the disciples' mission field.

Jesus expands on this theme by using images of light. You are the light of the world. A light is not hidden under a bushel basket, but it is placed on a lampstand so that it shines on everything in the house.

The light does not call attention to itself. It is not the sun or the lamp that draws our attention. The light shines on everything in the house. The disciples are not glorifying themselves. They are casting light on the good deeds that God wants people to do.

The city on a mountain or city on a hill *does* draw attention to itself. People can see it from all over the valley. The city reflects the new community that the disciples are part of. It embodies the kingdom of God, breaking in amongst us. The city points beyond itself, to God and God's values.

Matthew is interpreting Isaiah 42:6-7: "I have called you in righteousness . . . [to be] a light to the nations." Matthew believes that Israel has failed in this mission and that it is up to the new community that Jesus is forming to be a light to the nations.

This is a sharp criticism of religion that is purely personal and private. Faith has a public character. Its true purpose is to bring out the best in the world, to bring heaven down to earth.

Jesus is not challenging the disciples to try harder to be salt and light. By following Jesus, they already are salt and light.

This brings them into conflict with the Pharisees, who are rivals with Matthew's community. They offer different visions of the path forward after the destruction of the Temple.

The disciples will be accused of trying to abolish the Law and the Prophets. There are disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees later in the Gospel of Matthew about what the Law and the Prophets mean. Most scholars believe that this reflects disputes that had intensified in Matthew's day.

Matthew believes that Jesus has come to embody the Law and the Prophets. Jesus embodies the will of God. He calls us to get off high center and move to a higher righteousness. Look beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law.

Matthew seems to double down. "I came not to destroy [the law and the prophets], but to fulfill them." Matthew could be looking to Greeks who have entered the movement, arguing that the Law is no longer binding. Matthew is very Jewish. He sees Jesus as an intensification of the Law and the Prophets.

## **Second Move: Conflicting Identities**

Each of us has many different identities. We have racial, religious, geographic, ideological and cultural identities. We have identities within our families, among our friends and within our professions.

The crisis in middle-class culture is conflicting identities, especially conflicting political identities. It is tearing us apart. We are seeing our political parties and our political ideology as the primary lens through which we see ourselves. We have become very tribal. We are guided by group identification more than reason. When a political issue arises, we reflexively advocate for and defend the position that our political parties are taking instead of independently analyzing the problem using our reason to come up with a solution.

We have become very tribal. The flip side is that we demonize people we disagree with. Political identity has become fair game for hatred. Ezra Klein, a political commentator, has written a new book called, *Why We're Polarized*. He cites a study conducted by Stanford University in 1960; it asked Americans whether they would be pleased, displeased or unmoved if their son or daughter married a member of the other political party. Only 5 percent of Republicans and 4 percent of Democrats said they would be upset by a mixed marriage. The polling firm YouGov asked the same question in 2010. This time 49 percent of Republicans and 33 percent of Democrats objected to marrying outside the party.

When I studied for my trip to Israel/Palestine last month, one of the problems I had was finding an objective history of the relationship between the Israelis and the Palestinians in the last 100 years. If I was coming to come back to you and report on the conflict, I felt that to have any integrity I needed to be as objective as I could.

The defining event for the Palestinians was what they call the Nakba. It means catastrophe in Arabic. It refers to the 1948 War when Israel declared its independence and, depending on your perspective, 700,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes or they chose to flee from their homes. One of the biggest holidays of the year for Palestinians is Nakba Day. They celebrate it on May 15, which was the day after Israel announced its independence as a new state in 1948.

We definitely got a Palestinian perspective in my seminary course. The reading list course had three books about the Nakba. I asked Vered Harris, the rabbi at the Temple B'Nai Israel in Oklahoma City to suggest a book that would offer the Israeli perspective. I read it and thought it was excellent. It was written by an author on the Israeli left. He tried to be even-handed. Still, his book only had one page on the Nakba.

The mainstream American press gives us the Israeli perspective. They create a narrative that Palestine is filled with terrorists. Israel needed to build a wall and create checkpoints in the West Bank to protect itself from suicide bombers. We have an image of Palestinian youth as throwing rocks. Palestinians have a different narrative. They see rock throwing as a form of protest. They throw rocks against the barrier wall and paint graffiti on it to protest against the military occupation of Palestine by Israel.

We heard two speakers from the Parents Circle while we were in Bethlehem. It is a grassroots organization of Israelis and Palestinians who have had families members killed in the conflict. They are a support group. They comfort and grieve with each other.

One of the speakers was an Israeli man whose daughter was killed in 1977 by a suicide bomber. He said that joining the Parents Circle changed his life.

I was 47 years old. It was first time I had met Palestinians as human beings who suffered as I suffered. I was shocked and deeply moved. I am not a religious person. From that moment I devoted my life to go anywhere and talk to anyone to convey simple message: we are not doomed to kill each other. We can change and break this cycle of blood and revenge.

I believe that we need to listen to the pain of each other. Then you can expect the other to listen to your pain. Then reconciliation can begin. The other way is nowhere. Six hundred families are members of this organization. We put cracks in this wall of hatred. Through these cracks a little life comes in.

I asked him how they reconcile their narratives. He said:

There is no such thing as a common narrative. Each of us looks at history from his own angle. We can have a two-state solution or something else. A state is not something to die for. A state is not sacred. A state is a tool. You use it to pay taxes.

He went on to say that they essentially need to craft a new narrative and leave the old narratives behind. "We are doomed to live in this land together. There is sea of blood between these two nations. . . . One thing is essential: respect. All the rest are technicalities that can be solved."

### **Third Move: A New Common Identity**

Seeing each person as a beloved child of God is a good goal, and we often lift up that image in worship, but it is hard to do. It essentially does away with the tribal instinct that is hard-wired into us. With that image, everyone is part of the same tribe.

The Apostle Paul saw his chief task as building a new common identity in Christ for Gentiles and Jews. He says in his Letter to the Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female in Christ Jesus.” Those identities recede and are superseded by a new identity in Christ, which brings all Christians together. He makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. He says, he has received reports that some are saying, “I belong to Paul, or I belong to Apollos or I belong to Cephas.” He asks, “Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?”

I see one of my chief tasks as minister as helping to build a sense of Christian identity in each of you, as disciples with a little d and a big D. Our identity in Christ should stand apart from all our other identities.

Each of us will still have a political identity. Democrats tend to focus on social justice, trying to help oppressed peoples and standing in solidarity with them. Republicans are more concerned with individual freedom, protecting the individual from an overreaching government.

Can we form a new identity in Christ that embraces both? We see a concern for both in today’s text: “You will be persecuted . . . because of me.” By resisting an unjust status quo in the dominant culture, you will be persecuted.

One difference is to let the issues that we are concerned about rise from our faith instead of from the talking points of the political parties. Mass incarceration cuts across party lines. So does the death penalty. So does concern for immigrants and refugees. So does concern for Palestinians who have lost their civil rights through occupation by a foreign military power. When we see people who are suffering, we cannot help but be moved.

Our role is to be salt and light. We can let go of any pretensions of taking control of the government or thinking that we can bring in the values of the kingdom of God through elections. Elected officials will be the last ones to usher in the values of the kingdom.

Instead we model what a nonviolent community looks like. We model what a community looks like that has let go of partisan political divisions. We are pure of heart. Our actions are consistent with our talk. We visit the prisoner, we clothe the immigrants and refugees, we work with our Jewish and Muslim friends in Oklahoma City to shine a light on the tragic situation of the Palestinians. We bring in the police

to have a community discussion so that we can shine a light their protocols for the use of force.

### **Conclusion**

I am less concerned about being persecuted for following Jesus than being ignored. Our neighborhood community may not notice the work we are doing. It may not recognize that we are responding to God's call. We can leave the results in God's hands. Our task is to witness to the good news of the kingdom.

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