

## “Losing Our Religion, Finding Our Faith”

### Matthew 5: 1-20

Let me start out by saying...that all the things which Jesus is saying in this text is the essence of the good news for us as the people of God. From the beginning of the passage where he talks about blessings for the poor in spirit and for those that mourn, to the part about how our commitment to God promotes persecution to the very end of this text when Jesus says that unless we do far better than the Pharisees when it comes to right living, we will never know the first thing about entering the Kingdom of God, all of it is the good news. It is the Gospel message-laid out for us. And no matter how hard it is for us to take in, to wrap our minds around, to live out as part of the Body of Christ, all of it is the Gospel message.

Let me also say that what Jesus is saying in this text is not something new. Jesus didn't come up with the concepts of being the salt of the Earth and the Light of the World all by himself. They were and are part of the liturgy of his faith tradition. These images are found in the prophets of the Old Testament. What Jesus is doing is speaking out of a faith tradition which goes back thousands of years. Because in some shape or fashion, from Genesis to Revelation, there is a call to people of God to be part of a larger community, a community that welcomes all of

God's people. From Genesis to Revelation, there is a call to for the people of God to be in relationship with one another, to be in relationship with those society has deemed as "other". From Genesis to Revelation, there is a call for the people of God to take our faith seriously and to not let it be something restricted to an hour on Sunday morning. In this section known as the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus is doing is bringing forth the very foundations of faith, love, grace, mercy, peace and justice, and filling them full of meaning in a new context for the people of God.

That being said...I will be the first to admit that all of it is overwhelming. The stuff that Matthew is laying out before us is not the me and Jesus, friends forever, kind of stuff we like to hear, that we would rather hear, that we like to pretend is really the essence of the Good News. Nor is it the stuff which allows us to plead ignorance when it comes down to recognizing, to naming all the hurt and brokenness in our world. And it is certainly not the stuff which allows us to stay in our comfort zones while continuing the us verse them larger narrative the world tells us to believe and support.

Again, hear me say that all of the things which Jesus says in this text is the essence of the Gospel message. But seriously, even we will admit we have a hard time embracing the concept that persecution is a good thing. But there it is...all laid out, the essence of the Gospel message for us as the people of God.

So where does that leave us...those of us sitting in the pews, those who get that even though we know with our heads that the Gospel message calls us to live in ways that are counter-cultural to the larger world narrative of greed and power, with our hearts, we struggle to live out its message because it is so difficult, because it stretches us, because it can be so overwhelming at times? Where does this leave us?

In looking at this text, what we need to realize is that Matthew lays out before us are uncomfortable Truths, truths which Jesus preached, truths which Jesus taught, again truths which Jesus gave to us to empower us to become the people God created and calls us to be...people of love, people of grace, people of mercy and yes, people of justice as well.

For us as people of faith, these things are the starting point for our faith conversations. The very things which Jesus says in this text are not requirements. They are not commands. They are blessings. They are words of commission for us as Jesus' disciples. They speak into being what we are already. We are Salt of the Earth. We are the Light of the World.

These things are the starting points for us on this journey of transformation. They are ways for us to begin becoming the people God calls us to be. They are ways to prevent the Gospel message from becoming something it was never

intended to be...which is a message which supports systems of oppression, a message which embraces the powers that be, a message which never connects us to the Kingdom of God in our midst here and now.

The very things Jesus says in this text invite us to begin imagining a different world, not only for us but for all of God's children as well. They are not ways to point out how we have failed in our mission as people of faith. Rather they are words to inspire us to not settle for anything less than the Kingdom of God fully realized here on Earth, here and now for all of God's people, just as Jesus promised.

Or let me say it this way... A few weeks ago, a contemporary Christian hymn went viral for all the right and wrong reasons. The background to this story is that this hymn was written by a young man who grew up in the evangelical tradition and he fell in love with the Church. He was inspired by its love of Jesus. He was challenged by its words of mission and grace. He was made whole by the welcome of love he received.

Yet he shared that the longer he stayed in the Church, the more he began to see a disconnect between what the Church preached and what it practiced. It really came to head for him the last few years So he decided to put his feelings and thoughts down on paper and it turned into this hymn.

This young man shared that he saw how religion had been weaponized by the wider Church and that he noticed that the list of casualties from these actions was long. He said, “That’s been the biggest source of frustration and confusion for me and what inspired me to write a song, a song which calls the Church to live out the words it put into his mouth.

“I had a plan to sit down and write out a song that critiqued and criticized the wider Church. “I planned to do this loud song full of righteous anger but instead it turned into a prayer, turned into a posture of listening to show the love behind the critique. My loud angry song turned into an invitation to come home, to practice what we preach because ultimately the Church taught me better than this.”

In other words: “Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

Or if you don’t like that one: “Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If God makes you light-bearers, you don’t think God is going to hide you under a bucket, do you? God is putting you on a light stand. Now that God has put you there on a hilltop, on a light

stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. Because by opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven." May it be so. Amen.