

“Salt and Light,” based on Matthew 5:13-16
A sermon preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Smith-Bartlett
at The Larchmont Avenue Church
February 5, 2017

I.

Decades after surviving the Holocaust, Viktor Frankl—a pioneer in the field of psychotherapy—gave a talk on why we should believe in others.

As an illustration for this talk, Frankl shared with his audience that he’d recently started taking flying lessons. On the day that he was learning to land the plane, Frankl’s instructor taught him a move called “crabbing”. You see, when winds are normal, one can simply fly from point A and land at point B. However, when a crosswind is involved, if you start at point A and aim for point B, you will drift down and fall short of your target. This is where the crabbing technique comes into play—in order to get to the intended destination in the event of crosswinds, one has to aim for a point north of point B, and then because of the wind, the plane will land at point B.

The same is true, Frankl says, for us. Frankl reasons that if we take others as they really are—or even, and maybe especially, as who we *are afraid that* they really are—that we will make them worse. But, if we overestimate others by seeing them in an ideal light—if we overshoot that target, like in crabbing—we promote others to what they really can be.

Think of what child psychologists tell us—that for every negative comment that a child hears about him- or herself, it takes ten positive comments to restore that child’s self-esteem back to where it was before the negative comment.

Frankl’s point in a sentence is this: “If we take [another] as [they are], we make [them] worse, but if we take [another] as [they] should be, we make [them] capable of becoming what [they] can be.”¹

II.

I think Jesus is doing something similar in our text this morning.

Jesus is still teaching on the mountain in Galilee. He’s just shared the Beatitudes—the blessings—with the disciples and the crowd gathered around him. Blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are the meek...blessed are the peacemakers...blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks/viktor_frankl_youth_in_search_of_meaning.html

And then Jesus continues to speak blessing—You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Not just a blessing to Peter, Andrew, James and John, those first disciples who dropped their fishing nets and left home to follow Jesus. Not just a blessing to certain, pre-screened members of the crowd who have proven their merits. No—Jesus isn't picking and choosing here.

Jesus speaks this blessing to everyone gathered. He speaks it to the ones who might nod in agreement, recognizing these traits in themselves already. He speaks it to the ones who might have lost a bit of their flavor and their luster over the years. He speaks it to the ones who might not believe that they could ever be worthy of such names, and the ones who have been told repeatedly that they will never be worthy of such blessing.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Each and every one of you who are here by choice or by chance, Jesus says. Each and every one of you, regardless of where you are in your faith journey, regardless of if your questions and doubts are greater than your answers and beliefs. Each and every one of you—this isn't a longing for what we once were in Eden or a longing for what we will someday be in the coming peaceful kingdom—but each and every one of you *now*. This is the message—the gospel truth—with which Jesus begins his ministry. This is the gospel truth that Jesus speaks to us scholars and sojourners and skeptics and so on and so forth, throughout the ages and into eternity. This is the gospel truth that makes us capable of becoming what we truly are and can be.

III.

I grew up hearing the pastor of my home church frequently quote Karl Barth, preeminent theologian of the 20th century, as saying that the preacher must preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. He would sometimes include the addendum that we are to read each in light of the other.

And while preaching is always an audacious task if we take it seriously, it feels especially audacious this week. Today more than usual, I'm very aware of the challenge that heeding Barth's words presents.

In conversations with colleagues this week, the question has been this: are we pastoral or prophetic this week? Do we speak words of comfort or words of challenge?

I was in Denver two weeks ago for a Christian education conference, and our first preacher and speaker was a Lutheran pastor named Nadia Bolz-Weber. Nadia is known in church circles for being edgy—she has several visible tattoos, she is quite open about being

a recovering alcoholic, and her language in the pulpit is, let's say, salty...and not in the sense of this morning's text.

Because Nadia is edgy, I was a little surprised to hear her say that she was a pastoral and not a prophetic preacher. I know what she meant—she meant that when it comes to her reading and interpretation of Scripture, that she leans towards offering words of comfort and assurance to her people. She said that she is prophetic when she feels like it's what her people need in a particular week—but her lens is still primarily pastoral even in the prophetic mode.

I know what she meant, and admittedly I find that I lean that way myself, and yet I have to disagree in separating the two...because I don't think they are mutually exclusive.

Was Jesus pastoral or prophetic? Did he comfort the afflicted, or afflict the comfortable? Did he do justice, or love kindness?

Are there times when one is emphasized more than the other? Sure. But can we truly separate them and still proclaim the truth of the gospel? No.

And so my answer to that question this week—are we pastoral or prophetic in our preaching?—my answer is that we are both.

Because this week especially, we need both.

This week, we need the comfort and the challenge of the gospel that calls us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger in our midst—the gospel that points to the Old Testament memory that the Hebrew people were once strangers in the land of Egypt, a memory that shapes our collective identity.

This week, we need the comfort and the challenge of the gospel that calls us to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be peacemakers—the gospel that points to the prophet Isaiah's chosen fast of letting the oppressed go free, of satisfying the needs of the afflicted, of being the repairer of the breach.

This week, we need the comfort and the challenge of the gospel that proclaims that our risen Lord and Savior was recognized and proclaimed to the world first by women.

This week, we need the comfort and the challenge of the gospel that proclaims that our Lord and Savior first entered this world as a refugee.²

² Cf. [https://www.pcusa.org/news/2017/1/28/stated-clerk-opposes-order-banning-refugees-entry-/](https://www.pcusa.org/news/2017/1/28/stated-clerk-opposes-order-banning-refugees-entry/)

IV.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. This who we are, who we can be. This is our comfort.

So go be salt. So go be light. This is who we are called to be, this is what we are called to do. This is our challenge.

Between these two, salt and light, I think its safe to say that light is the more elegant metaphor. Our music today is evidence of this—our hymns and choral pieces are filled with light imagery. We can easily imagine what it might mean to be light in darkness...to be that small flicker of love and hope and peace that can't be overcome, that small flicker that joined with the light of others, becomes a fire that God can use to change the world.

But salt as a metaphor just doesn't have the same poeticism, the same effect. How many songs do you know about salt?

Here's the thing about salt... our text notes that it adds flavor. In a similar realm, it is used to preserve foods. But we are wise to remember that salt also heals wounds. To be fair, it stings like hell at first. But soon enough, it heals.

Sisters and brothers, you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. So go be salt. So go be light.

Amen.