

SERMON “Living the Ordinary - Salt, Light, and Vocation”

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SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 2: 1-16

Proclaiming Christ Crucified

2When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ³And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

The True Wisdom of God

6 Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. ⁷But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’—¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

Matthew 5: 13-20

Salt and Light

13 ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

14 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

The Law and the Prophets

17 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

SERMON "Living the Ordinary - Salt, Light, and Vocation"

I am a big fan of salt on my popcorn. I can skip the butter, but not the salt. I must have salt. Now I try to be conscious of my health. So I do not use salt regularly, not even in cooking. But a friend, who is also a really good cook and loves to make anything with chocolate, assures me that she puts a pinch of salt in all her chocolate recipes. She says salt brings out the flavor of the chocolate. Actually, they say that salt, in any recipe, brings out the flavor of the other ingredients.

Jesus knew all about salt. He knew it was valuable. In Jesus' day salt would be used as a preservative as well as a spice. Salt also had a role in the history of his faith, as an ingredient used to bless the tent where Moses would be meeting God, a most holy place. In Exodus, we read that God told Moses to "*Take* sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (an equal part of each), ³⁵and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; ³⁶and you shall beat some of it into powder, and put part of it before the covenant* in the tent of meeting where I shall meet you; it shall be for you most holy." (Exodus 30:34)

So for Jesus to tell his listeners that they were salt, he was telling them they were valuable and that they had a role to play. He was telling them that they were to bring out the flavor, to bring out the best in others and to preserve what was good.

Now, Jesus was not talking to one or two individuals here. He was talking to “you” in the plural. He was talking to the same people who were listening when he turned the wisdom of the day on its head by telling them who was blessed. He was talking to his disciples and to those on that hillside who had come to listen to him speak and teach and to have him heal them. And he was not telling them to become salt. He was telling them that they were salt. It was who they were made to be. All of his followers, including all of us are salt.

Similarly, Jesus told the crowd that they were light. Now I don’t know about you, but I have some candles and a battery operated lantern in a cabinet in my kitchen. It’s when we lose electricity as a result of some nasty storm. It’s there because I want to be able to see around my house. And I need light for that. Light enables us to see to where we are going and move about in safety. Light also enables us to appreciate the beauty - the vividness of colors, the variety of shapes and designs, and intricate details that we might otherwise miss. Light is valuable for protection and safety but also as a bearer of beauty. As light shines, it illuminates our surroundings to protect us and to bring us pleasure, joy and hope.

And Jesus did not tell the people that they were to become light. He told them that they were light, already. So their responsibility was to be that light – to shine, to illuminate the good around them but also to illuminate the good that they do so that they could glorify God.

Jesus had again taken simple, but essential everyday elements and used them as teaching tools. Jesus had a way of doing that – whether it was salt and light, or lilies of the fields and birds of the air, or sand or rocks as foundations for houses. Jesus used what people could relate to when teaching them how to be his followers, how to live a life that glorified God.

Jesus was relating to people using simple, every day elements to teach them how to live. But Jesus was not offering them new teachings to replace the laws that served as guidelines from their faith for their lives. Jesus stressed that he had come to fulfill the law and not replace it. Jesus lived his faith as a devout Jew. As a devout Jew, he would have looked to the law, not as a series of do’s and don’ts, not as an imposition, but as a guide for living a life that would glorify God.

And Jesus had some instructions for those teachers or leaders of the people, “Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but

whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Now those can be concerning or even daunting to those who preach or have chosen ordained ministry as our vocation; like me. While I can't speak for others, these words remind me my responsibility to God and my congregation. These words reflect the question that I am called to ask myself as I prepare a sermon or participate in a discussion - to ask myself if the words that I am preparing are consistent with God's will and desire for all people.

Yet teaching is more than preaching, or speaking challenging or uplifting or comforting words on a Sunday or during a Zoom meeting. Have any of you ever heard the phrase, “actions speak louder than words.” Or how about these words of Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary use words.”

Those words apply to all who desire to follow Jesus. So while Jesus may have been warning those who teach to uphold God's law of love, Jesus was speaking to all who were present when he spoke his words of salt and light. He was not just speaking to his disciples. We are all salt and light, and called to live as such.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, seminary teacher, author and lecturer, in her book The Preaching Life, writes of her discernment process, making the decision of whether she would seek ordination or not. She shares that she was “...wary of ordination. If the purpose of church was to equip all God's people for ministry to the world - as I had been taught – then it made no sense to designate one of the people ‘the minister’ in a congregation.” And if the ordained person was meant to support the congregation as people engaged in their various ministries, then it made no sense to “give that person an office inside the four safe walls of the church.” (pp. 21-22)

Ultimately, Barbara Brown Taylor did decide to become ordained. In making that decision, she said did not see it as lofty. Rather she felt she would be spending “ the rest of my life with a community willing to help me figure out what it meant. It did not strike me as an exalted idea at the time, nor does it seem so now, almost ten years later. The one true turning point in a person's life is when he or she joins the body of Christ, however that comes about – by sprinkling or by immersion, by proxy or by confession. That is the moment we join ranks with God. That is when we become the flesh and blood of God in the world. The decision to become ordained does not supersede

that moment; it is simply one way of acting it out, one among very many others.” (p. 23)

And she goes on to say that she believes that God calls us in many ways throughout our lives – to different tasks or different communities. She differentiates between our “office” and our vocation. Our office is what we do. Our vocation is to serve God through what we do. But whatever we are called to do, community is an important element. For in community, as the body of Christ, there are different eyes and ears, minds and hearts and voices that will support us and guide us as we live our various calls.

Barbara Brown Taylor references Martin Luther’s vision of the priesthood of all believers. She explained that

“To believe in one’s own priesthood is to see the extraordinary dimensions of an ordinary life, to see the hand of God at work in the world and to see one’s own hands as necessary to that work. Whether those hands are diapering an infant, assembling an automobile or balancing a corporate account, they are God’s hands, claimed by God at baptism for the accomplishment of God’s will on earth.” (p. 30)

It is in the ordinary roles of our lives that we are called to represent our God. It is in the ordinary where God is found. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that in the sacraments, elements like bread and wine or grape juice at communion, become signs of God’s grace. And once we can recognize God’s grace and presence in the ordinary elements of bread and wine and juice, we can recognize God’s grace all around us.

And as we become aware of God’s sacraments and grace shared with us on the altar at church, we can recognize other altars where God’s grace is shared. She explains

“A gardener’s altar may be his garden, where sacraments of seed and bud contain the grace of God’s life-giving power; a painter’s altar may be her easel, where sacraments of canvas and oil evoke the grace of God’s creative genius; a father’s altar may be his lap, where sacraments of children exhibit the grace of God’s love... A physician’s altar maybe her examining room, where sacraments of other people’s bodies remind her of her kinship of all creation. A word processor’s altar may be his desk, where the sacraments of software and computer printouts mark his participate in in the human effort to communicate...The search for sacraments becomes a search for

our connections to God and to one another, and there is not end to them.”
(p. 35-36)

Jesus said that we all, as his followers, are salt. We are all meant to bring out the goodness and enrich the lives and goodness of others. Jesus said that we are all light. We are equipped to illuminate the good in others and illuminate what we do to shine the way to God, the way of love. Martin Luther spoke of the priesthood of all believers, the community of the baptized living out their baptisms – their connections to God and one another by embracing what they do in life as a way to share God. Barbara Brown Taylor opens our eyes to the endless ways that we can see beauty of innumerable sacraments, God’s grace made visible, in our midst.

May we experience those sacramental times as moments of grace as we live our connection to God and one another in the ordinary yet extraordinary. And as we do, reflecting on our lives, our ministries and where God calls us, let us consider these words of Paul, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.”

So, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, let us use our God given gifts through our vocations. Let us live as salt and light – to enhance and illuminate God’s presence and the goodness in our lives and the world.

Taylor, Barbara Brown. The Teaching Life. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1993.

