
The Salty Way of Discipleship

Matthew 5:13-20

In the season of Epiphany—which, according to our lectionary calendar, we are still in—the Scripture texts we encounter are largely concerned with making the theological claim that Jesus is Divine, the blessed Son of God. A series of Epiphany texts have been lined up each week—at least, by those who devised the lectionary schedule—to help us come awake to this realization—“us” being any who are willing to listen over the past two millennia.

These texts begin with Gentile astrologers following a star to visit and pay homage to Jesus as an infant. It is a cosmic event that leads these foreign wisdom-seekers to respond to his birth and *worship* him, not just admire him. In Jesus’s adult baptism, the heavens open up and a dove descends on him. Then, a Voice claims, “This is my beloved Son.” The wedding at Cana shows Jesus’s creative power over nature when he turns water to wine. John calls this the first “sign” through which Jesus “revealed his glory.” And next week, in the Transfiguration text, Jesus’s glory is on full display, when his face shines like the sun. His clothes become dazzling white in the presence of Judaism’s past heroes, Moses and Elijah. And again, a Voice declares him Son.

All of this would set the stage for when Jesus was ready to make the radical claim: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life.” “I am the light . . . the light of life,” Jesus says. This hits our ears just right, a very Jesus-y thing to say.

As Christians, we sing to *Jesus our Light*. It is our highest Christological claim in worship: “The Lord is my Light and My Salvation”, “We Are Marching in the Light of God”, “Christ, Be Our Light”, as we sang at the opening of this service, But in this, perhaps we take for granted just how radical a move it was to borrow the metaphor of light, and claim it for himself—“the light that gives life.”

The book of Matthew was written particularly for a Jewish audience. They would have immediately picked up on this. In Hebrew, *ore (orh)* means “light”. So the word *Torah*, carrying that root word, was more than just the first five books of the Bible, it was the *light which gives life*. Torah—or the law—was the “light of the world” for the Jews, not what they saw as some heretical rabbi who discipled a group of outcasts on a hillside. You can imagine how making this claim, as Jesus did, would have highly provoked the religious leaders and warranted capital punishment.

Let me just pause for a second and ask us to remember just how political Jesus was. I’ve heard so many Christians prop up a lovable, hippie Jesus—who just loved hanging out with people and kissing babies [ok, maybe not that last part]. Even recently, I saw someone pointing to Jesus, the peacemaker, as a counter-argument against all the recent protesting. “Jesus was solely concerned with how to be a good citizen,” they argued. Sometimes, I wonder if people actually read the red letters. Jesus was confrontational and motivated to break through our customary ways to set the whole socio-political system on its head. Jesus is risky business—What John Lewis alluded to when he talked about getting into “good and necessary trouble”. Jesus will ask of you to completely drop your nets and follow a whole new way of living. There is little that is comfortable about Jesus-following.

When Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” he was saying: Torah was the *only* way to know the light of life; yet, I have come to embody that light and express it to its fullness—to put flesh on it, to nuance it in ways that look like compassion, mercy, and justice-making for neighbor. Jesus wasn’t trying to replace the old law. He wasn’t starting a new religion: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill”—He was the exemplification of Torah, the expression of God’s law but in a higher key, a flesh-and-bones example of what God’s reign looks like in this world.

These past couple of weeks, we have been reading through the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus’s first sermon. It lands on our ears so comfortably. Maybe its the way we hear that word, “Blessed”, like a warm, church-y blanket. Or maybe it’s the familiarity to think about “the meek” and “the poor in spirit”. And we can forget just how radical a moment in history . . . how destabilizing this shift in thinking, that is being re-imagined in these words. Still . . . consider

how Jesus uses his hilly, grassy pulpit to go one step further: The Light That Gives Life, turns things around: “*You* are the salt of the earth . . . *you* are the light of the world.” There was Torah, there were the Hebrew people—who were to be a light to the nations—there was Jesus, and now there’s you and me.

Epiphany becomes not just revelation about Jesus, but revelation about us, who you and I are—who we are supposed to be—*this*, Jesus wants us to wake up to as well. But we do have to ask, who is the “you” here? Is he talking to us individually? No, the “you” is plural. I’m originally from the south, so in my ears, I hear: “All y’all”. “All of y’all who are . . .

The poor in spirit

The meek

The merciful

The peacemakers

The persecuted

It’s “y’all” or “you all” because: “A *city* on a hill cannot be hidden.” Jesus speaks of a city, a polis, which resists our usual interpretation to see this as a call to personal spirituality—what has led many to moral superiority and Christian supremacy. We cannot miss the implication here: the beatitudes are accomplished in community, and open to everyone. “When all y’all participate together in the act of mourning, when you join the collective that are peacemakers, when you stand with the group that is being persecuted, and in that solidarity, you commit to giving mercy . . . ” Then, you are the light of the world, the salt of the earth, a city which cannot be hidden.

Salt is a fascinating metaphor too. And timely to be thinking about this, as salt is being spread all over the place, these freezing winter days. You can do all kinds of things to salt: You can mine it, grind it, crush it, dissolve it in water, and yet when you evaporate the water, it’s still there, salty salt. So when Jesus says, “If salt loses its saltiness, can it be made salty again,” perhaps the question isn’t about a chemical change, but an issue of dilution. You cannot make salt not salty, but you can certainly make it less so.

So we ask: just what is it that dulls our saltiness? I think it’s fear, it’s tribalism, it’s the need to always win, the need to prop up the ego, it’s buying into the fallacy of empire (that certain people are meant to keep power and position and

the rest is just collateral damage). There are many things that can dilute our saltiness, you and I.

I don't know if you've seen some of the viral videos this week of the Singing Resistance Songbook in action in Minnesota. It is quite an experience to watch—I encourage you to pull up some of the videos. Thousands are marching through the streets in frigid temperatures *singing* their protest. It's powerful! In one song:

Put down your weapons,
Come sing your part,
We walk the same the ground
But we've been torn apart

In another song, they sing:

We are here, with our neighbors,
Our love for each other to carry us through.
We are here, with our city,
Our love for each other to carry us through.
Yes, our love for each other will carry us through.

The songs are meant to be a plea for ICE agents to lay down their weapons and give up their terrorizing ways. The irony is not lost on us lectionary preachers this week. On display, we see the salt of the earth seeking to melt ice through the power of solidarity and community . . . and it sounds like a harmonious song! It has now become a thing: The Singing Resistance Toolkit and Songbook. You can look it up and download it online. There are training sessions for song leaders to learn these protest songs so that soon all over the country our streets will cry out not with violence and vengeance but with the sounds of harmony. What does it look like to be salt of the earth: these days, I believe it looks and *sounds* like this. Preserving those around you. Permeating everything without needing to be in the spotlight. Melting what fear has frozen over.

In closing, Epiphany is not just celebrating that Christ is Light, it is waking up to the reality that the Light has chosen to shine through those who take on the values of God's kin-dom.

And that was a very blue-color calling for the prophet Isaiah:

“Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn . . .
. . . if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.” (Is. 58)

There’s an old folk song that has the line: “Everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die.” How true that can be. Everybody wants to gain access to God’s kin-dom but which ones are willing to lay down their otherwise “normal” life for it, in service to others? To be salt and light in the world, there is a dying of sorts. Jesus said: “If you want to follow me, you must take up your cross daily.” He wasn’t calling for heroes and saviors, he was looking for cross-like servanthood. I imagine when a group of people, perhaps even a church, all decide to live in Jesus’s salty ways, it will shine like a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. The church should be invested in creating a visible, alternate community built on the upside-down values of Jesus.

It’s the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi:

“Let me be an instrument of your peace.
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.”

This is the social order Jesus is after. This is being salt and light. And this, *only*, should order the ways of being church in our community. In a few moments, we’ll come again to this table to feast on the bread of life and the cup of salvation. There is no better reminder of what it looks like to be salt and light in the world. May our act of shared communion today be our re-commitment to be salty, light-filled, Jesus-y people.

That is my prayer for us. Amen.