

**Sermon: Considering the Salt of the Earth****Scripture: Matthew 5:13-20****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 5, 2017**

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“You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world,” Jesus says. Before we apply this passage to ourselves as disciples, as preachers are apt to do, I think it’s worth pausing to remember, at least at the outset, who the “you” is in this passage. Jesus is directing this to the peasant masses and specifically the lower working class disciples who are following him. And Matthew, the Gospel writer, is writing his account about 40 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection for those early Christians oppressed and struggling as second class or lesser citizens in Rome, an empire none too happy with their devotion to anyone but Caesar.

So in many ways this affirming “you are salt of the earth, light of the world” was not directed to the likes of us, I mean, to educated middle to upper class citizens who have had the privileges, benefits, and positions in this society that have already given them huge opportunities to let their light shine before others and to season the world around them with the salt of their gifts and perspectives. Jesus instead was talking to the lower class, the under class, those whose saltiness was being trampled underfoot and whose light was shoved under the bushel of a violent and oppressive Roman Empire. He was telling people in that situation - those poor in spirit, those mourners, those persecuted – remember the beatitudes from last week - those meek ones, that despite all outward appearances they were the light of the world.

“You are the salt of the earth.” Jesus is talking to his disciples but that phrase from scripture has become a familiar idiom, so that when we hear “salt of the earth”... we think usually of an older working class man or woman, a farmer maybe, definitely a laborer or some sort, who leads a simple life with a certain honesty and goodness in their simplicity. But as I heard the phrase in the scripture this week in light of our current political situation, one thing nudged at me and I tried to ignore it but it kept coming up and that was that it was those salt of the earth type people – at least a lot of them - who put Donald Trump in office.

President Trump’s inauguration speech sounded to many of us like a bizarre dystopian picture of an America in shambles and on the brink of chaos. But while we might have been shocked by such a picture, there were many in rural middle America who were nodding their heads in full agreement, glad that someone was finally naming the truth. Statistics show that rural middle to lower class blue-collar America over the last 30 years has been dealing with a formidable increase of joblessness, divorce, mental illness, heroin and prescription opioid abuse, and suicide – I mean, some serious suffering. Over these years, secure jobs that provide for a decent middle class life have been drained for various reasons from the white working class and now go to the college educated. And when we remember that in our country only 30% of Americans 25 and older are college educated, I for one am brought up short and realize suddenly how someone who knew how to speak their language and effectively offered the promise of middle class security back to them could be elected.

There is a lot being written about it all that we working class professionals should read to understand the others. Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis is the NY Times bestseller that's being read right now and an article that I found so enlightening and that increased my compassion quotient quite a bit for the salt of the earth Trump voter is by Joan Williams in the Harvard Business Review called "What so Many People Don't Get About the U.S. Working Class". (I can post it on-line with my sermon this week on our FCCW website.)

I *am* disturbed by our president's immigration ban and do not want to dismiss such action that flies in the face of obvious gospel values and I have been so grateful and heartened that so many in our country have been standing against it. But the challenge I am hearing from this scripture this morning is the need for those of us middle to upper class educated professionals to not get too entrenched in our class culture that we write off the others in our country as racist, small minded, xenophobes, because that is not who they are but our brothers and sisters who have been suffering and fearful and up til now – til President Trump captured their imaginations for some reason – have felt marginalized, oppressed, and unheard. It's true that the Gospel doesn't let them off the hook in their gaining power now to then marginalize, oppress and ignore others, but for those of us on the more privileged side of our society the Gospel requires that we notice their mourning and pain and poverty as well as the refugee, the Muslim and the immigrant.

The Gospel, because it says things like "your righteousness must exceed even the scribes and Pharisees" requires that we listen open-

hearted to everyone, resist rushing to judgment of anyone, and build bridges across all sorts of divides. They will know we are Christians how? By our love, by our indiscriminant love. And if there is a brokenness, a divide right now that is tearing our country, our people, our churches, our families apart it is this culture gap running through classes which manifests itself in our politics, at our dinner tables, in our churches and everywhere else.

I must confess myself that it is an easier thing for me to say - let's stand up and welcome our Muslim brothers and sisters as one of us and protect their rights - and obviously we should do that - but that's easier for me than it is to imagine seeking understanding with, for instance, the rigid conservative Christian Trump voter. But that's exactly where the rubber meets the road in our Christian commitment to love, exactly where we feel least like loving. And that's exactly the place where we need to engage the Christian spiritual practice of confession, right when and where we feel the rush and excitement of our self-righteous judgment of others rising in us. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount challenges us throughout to traverse that road less traveled, for it's on that difficult road that the salt is needed and it's right there where the light is needed in a world that seems to be growing darker by the week....

### **Communion Invitation**

J: Beloved in Christ, the Gospel tells us that on the first day of the week Jesus Christ was raised from death, appeared to Mary Magdalene, on that same day sat at the table with two disciples and was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

W: We come to this table so that Christ may be made known to us as well in the breaking of this bread, so that we can receive him into our very selves and know that he journeys with us on the road ahead.

J: So join us for this is the joyful feast of the people of God. Men and women, youth and children, stumblers and sinners, those who know exactly what you believe and those who are unsure and doubt...

W: Come from the east and the west, from the north and south, and gather here around Christ's table. This table is for all those who wish to know God's presence more fully, to receive the bread of life and the cup of peace, and to share in the community of God's people.

### **Prayer of Consecration**

J: Gracious God, we ask you to bless this bread and cup and all of us with the outpouring of your Holy Spirit. Through this meal, make us the body of Christ, the church, unified as your servant people, that we may be salt and light and leaven for furthering your purpose for this world. Amen.

### **Sanctus:**

W: Holy, holy, holy, God of love and majesty, the universe proclaims your glory God. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest, Amen.

### **Words of Institution**

W: On the night that Christ was betrayed...Bread

J: Then he took the cup....

### **Affirmation**

It is Christ's death for the sake of love that we remember.

It is Christ's resurrection for the sake of life that we celebrate.

It is Christ's return for the sake of the world that we await.