

Beacons of Saltiness Dale Ramerman: Epiphany 5, Yr A, Matthew 5:1-12

In our Gospel reading, Jesus turns from the beatitudes to instructions about the life of discipleship, instructions for his disciples and for all who would follow Jesus. The discipleship of Jesus is lived out in the community of faith which is charged with a mission to the world, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus begins with a metaphor of salt, salt that has lost its saltiness. What can that mean? Metaphors have several possible meanings, and more than one interpretation may give us important insights. Salt is a seasoning. Is Jesus suggesting we must be the seasoning that flavors our community of faith? Some of us do that with vigor; some of us are a bit bland. But that's one possibility. But salt might also mean a sacrifice, or loyalty, or eating together ("sharing salt"), or, purification, or preservative, or a catalyst as in the process of curing pottery. Another possibility: Jesus probably spoke in Aramaic, and in Aramaic the word for "salt" is "Melho" which also can be understood as "king." Thus, perhaps Jesus was saying, "If a king has lost his kingliness, he is good for nothing and is to be cast out and trampled underfoot." That is a bit harsh but it may resonate with some of us.

You are the salt of the earth, the seasoning of your community of faith, the sacrifice, the purification, the preservative, catalyst, the King. Whichever possibility you choose, Jesus was clear that it is the disciples, and by extension, you and I, and not the religious leaders or religious establishment, that are called to make a difference in our community of faith and in the world.

Jesus in our Gospel reading uses a second metaphor which must be read with the metaphor of salt: we are not only the salt of the earth, we must be the light of the world that must shine for the world to see so that our good works glorify God. This second metaphor shapes the first one. Yes you are the salt, but your actions must be visible and reflect the values of the Kingdom of God, God's mission and our mission in the world.

The setting of Jesus' teaching must also be remembered. At the time of Jesus, the children of Israel were deeply divided. The Sadducees urged reasonable collaboration with Rome. The Zealots advocated a violent response to Rome. And a third group, the Pharisees, were themselves divided, with a faction that supported a violent response, and a group urging a retreat into isolation and a deeper private study and devotion to the Torah, practices that they believed would hasten the coming of God's messiah.

Jesus was urging another path: enemies were not to be hated but loved, not resisted but prayed for, not turned away but met with generosity. Jesus did not condemn the following of the Torah. But he taught that, in contrast to the Pharisees who isolated themselves as they waited the future reign of God, the good news Jesus was proclaiming, had already come. God was already doing a new thing.

Today, one of many pressing issue for followers of Christ is how we follow Jesus teaching in responding to the immigrant crisis around the world, a crises the United States has played no small part in creating.

The starting point for our discussion of immigrants is the Hebrew Testament book of Deuteronomy. Moses, after coming down Mount Sinai a second time with the Ten Commandments, addressed the Children of Israel and how they should deal of foreign immigrants, sojourners, or strangers:

*So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.*

That is one of more than 50 times in Hebrew scripture in which the Hebrew word translated as “stranger,” “immigrant,” or “sojourner” is to be found. Each time the foreigner, sojourner or stranger is addressed in the Old Testament, it is in the context of acceptance, welcome and kindness.

And what does Jesus teach about immigrants? In chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says we will be judged by whether we fed Jesus when he was the hungry, gave Jesus something to drink when he was thirsty and welcomed Jesus when he was a stranger. In response of the disciple’s questions about when they had done those things for Jesus, Jesus responded ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’

The Bible is not a book of directions for constructing a foreign policy. But it does teach core values about how we are to live our lives and what values we, in a democracy, should urge our leaders to follow. As Christians we have a duty to speak out, to be a light to the world by how we live our lives and by what we urge our leaders to do. Our Bishop set a good example recently by becoming a plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging the policy of the City of Seattle and the State Department of Transportation to destroy homeless encampments without notice. The recent women’s march was another positive example.

Condemning and excluding people because of their religion or ethnicity, is inconsistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the history of our nation. The Gospel does not distinguish between immigrants already in our country and those like Syrians desperate to find a safe place to live. “America First” is not a Christian value. As followers of Christ we are called to welcome, make room for, feed, and cloth the hungry and desperate whatever their religion. Whether the refugees are within or outside our country makes no difference. They are suffering children of God. We must take risks to help them, because God has taken risks in calling and relying on us.

When our leaders adopt policies contrary to the teaching of Jesus, we must speak up. We cannot be silent. We tried silence in the 1930's in the face of the rise of fascism by turning away Jews, who later died at the hand of the fascist leaders of Germany. That has been a black mark on our history ever since. As Reverend Diane asked in her homily last Sunday, "What kind of people are we?"

If our nation turns away from welcoming immigrants, we have lost our saltiness; we are no longer a beacon of light for the world.

Our country has a very mixed history of welcoming the stranger. God calls us to do better.

The answer I find in Jesus' words, and for much of our nation's history, is that we are a nation of immigrants; we welcome the hungry, the downtrodden, the alien calling to us for help. Jesus calls us to continue being be a beacon of hope for the homeless, the destitute, the persecuted, where ever they are found, and an example for the world.

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