

Salty Baptist Church
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Matthew 5:13-20
2-9-2020

I didn't know it at the time, but Thursday's inclement weather offered a unique opportunity for me to reflect on this morning's passage. The storms knocked out power at our house on Thursday night, and prevented our girls from going to preschool on Friday morning. That meant we got to enjoy dinner in the dark on Thursday night, and we also got to have an extended family breakfast hour on Friday morning.

My three-year-old, Mary Allen, likes to help her daddy make scrambled eggs, especially when school's out. It's not so much the eating of the eggs that she likes as much as the making of them. First, we smack 'em. Then we crack 'em. We say, "get out of there eggs!" Once their guts are in the bowl, we beat 'em up, and we mix 'em up. We pour them into the pan, and heat them up. And then the best part (at least for Mary Allen!), we have to get out the salt grinder, and the black pepper grinder, and put some in our mixture.

For Mary Allen, there's something transformative about this process, especially in adding the spices. She feels like she's personalized her meal, made it better, made it what it was meant to be by adding her mixture of salt, black pepper, and sometimes cheese, or on really special days, green food coloring. "Here you go, Daddy," she says with enthusiasm, "these are my special eggs, just for you!!!"

They make eggs to order in the kingdom of heaven. Admittedly, those scrambled eggs can sometimes be a little heavy on the salt. But the kingdom of heaven is less about how things taste, and more about how things are made.

We ate by flashlight lantern on Thursday night. The first few moments of dinner were a little choppy. Both of our girls felt the incessant need to keep opening and closing the lantern top. I've never experienced a sunrise, a rave, and total darkness all at the same time. After a few moments, Mary Allen decided that she wanted the lantern at arm's length, and she wanted it only slightly open.

Meteorologists might describe such an environment as having a peanut butter and jelly sandwich visibility of approximately sixteen inches.

Jacqueline convinced Mary Allen that our lantern would be much more useful if we opened it wider, and set it on top of the refrigerator, allowing our lantern to illumine the entire room. Mary Allen consented, and our PBJ visibility increased substantially. There's plenty of light in the kingdom of heaven, but it'll never be seen if we refuse to share it.

Salt flavors. Light illumines. Sure, we can eat plain porridge in the dark. But that's not living. That's subsiding. The kingdom of heaven is steeped in salt and light, the divine substance that doesn't just offer us subsistence, but also offers us what we need to live fully, to experience wholly, to thrive, to flourish, to be as God intends.

Remember, last week, we considered the Beatitudes, and we concluded, "Blessed is this community, blessed are the people of Sardis Baptist Church, because we are God's children." Our dependence on God, our confidence in God's enoughness, offers us independence from Caesar's fictitious measures of abundance.

The writer of Matthew ended the famous *Blessed are those* cadence of statements in verse eleven, but I don't think it would have been a stretch to keep using them in today's lection. Blessed are you, the community of Sardis Baptist Church, because you are salty. Blessed are you, the community of Sardis Baptist Church, because you are light. Here, in this room, is a people made by God, loved by God, endowed by God with a remarkable range of gifts and talents.

We don't need to go to the spice store, because we've got everything we need, here among us, to flavor God's presence in the world, right here, and right now.

We don't need to go to the hardware store for light bulbs, because we have everything we need, here among us, to illumine God's justice in the world, right here, and right now.

I think what Jesus was trying to say, to the disciples, and to the crowds, and to you and me also, is that we have been equipped to take advantage of a kingdom, a presence, a collaboration, an in-breaking of God into our lives at this very moment.

That's where the second part of this passage comes into play. You hear something about fulfilling the law rather than abolishing it. And you hear about a righteousness that should exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. You might also get tripped up by that last line that can sound like an entrance requirement.

Scholar Edwin Van Driel reminds us to consider our setting. Palestine was under Roman occupation, and the people of Judah and Israel had been captive to conquering empires for centuries. Moses had received Torah to help Israel live in covenant with God. As the nation came under outside rule, and the Jewish diaspora spread to parts unknown, Torah became a way for Israel to remain set apart. A strict adherence to the law preserved Jewish culture from the threat of Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and eventually Roman assimilation.

By the time of Jesus, and later, toward the end of first century when Matthew's community was defining itself, the Pharisees and scribes used a strict adherence to Torah to maintain their identity. Van Driel argues that if they couldn't have their political freedom, at least these groups could maintain their covenant living, keeping hope for the world God would one day restore.

Matthew's gospel villainizes these factions, in large part because their disagreements about whether or not Jesus was Messiah (a claim the temple establishment denied) ostracized Matthew's faith community from mainstream Judaism. The truth is grayer. Most scribes and Pharisees, not to mention Sadducees, were good, decent, wholly-authentic covenant people, who had an earnest desire to follow Torah. They tolerated, perhaps even cooperated with Rome, in order to carve out their own space in society. They chose to endure the present in the hopes that they might one day preserve a future.

When you consider that there were also Zealots, and other factions in Judaism that wanted to use violence to overthrow Roman occupation, no matter the odds, and no matter the consequences, you might find a little empathy for the Pharisees. After all, it was the violence of the Zealots that eventually led Rome to destroy Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE. And the Judaism we know today, one of profound goodness, has its roots in the Pharisaic tradition.

I say all of this, because the second part of our passage is not an indictment of the Pharisees, and it's not indictment of a fundamental application of scriptures, or of

law. It's good to be detailed in keeping covenant. I'm sure we all know a few A-types who can help us be more efficient in our righteousness. And honestly, we could all stand to have a little more command and knowledge of the scriptures we claim to assert, and a willingness to actually live them out.

Van Driel asserts that Jesus isn't criticizing the Pharisees and scribes for their application of Torah. He asserts that Jesus is reminding all of Israel, to stop living, stop preparing, stop assuming that God's restoration, God's arrival, God's presence is something that's still in exile.

We're not here to preserve what God will do, or what God will be in the future. God reminded us of that at the burning bush. Moses said, "Who are you?" God responded, "I'm YHWH," which means I am who I am, or more specifically, I'm gonna be who I'm gonna be. God's gonna be God, y'all. Part of our dependence on God is acknowledging that there's nothing we can or can't do that will affect the outcome of God's consistency. God's just that big.

Jesus announces that the kingdom of heaven has come near. That means that God is here, working right now, to make God's world God's world. That means, our living of covenant, our following of Torah, is not done in the hopes that a century from now God's gonna piece back together a broken temple, or rebuild a once-proud city. Instead, our Torah, our embodied faith, is practiced to recognize God's presence in the present, and the ability of that presence to transform brokenness into wholeness.

Every moment. Every conversation. Every meal. Every act of love. Every act of hospitality. Every act of neighbor-ing is a representation of God's in-breaking kingdom. In other words, Jesus is saying stop waiting for God to happen, and start embracing that God is happening right now.

Do you wanna be righteous? Reflect a Torah where you are salt, instead of someone who's saving salt for the perfect meal. Do you wanna be righteous? Reflect a Torah where you are light, instead of someone who's waiting for the right time to share that light.

We're God's. We've got salt. We've got light. Let's get busy in the present. Amen.