

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

February 5, 2017

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 5:1-16

Promise? Command?

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

How do we hear these familiar words of Jesus? What do they mean for us as those who bear his name - Christian — and follow him?

Are they a command? Be the light of the world! Be the salt of the earth!

Or are they a promise? You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

This year — let's hear them as a promise and see where that takes us!

Because here, Jesus isn't saying, "You *should* be the salt of the earth and light of the world." Or, "You *have* to be,..." let alone "You *better* be,...." Rather, he is saying, you *are*. As in *already* are. Even if you don't know it. Even if you once knew it and forgot. Even if you have a hard time believing it.

Jesus is making a promise to his disciples (and us — because when he'd talking to his disciples, he also talking to us) about their/our very being, he is not commanding, let alone threatening, us about what we should be doing.

I wonder if sometimes we imagine or experience God more like a divine law-maker and rule-enforcer than generous gift-giver. And when this is the case, I fear that our faith becomes joyless, and our life together as a church can become joyless as well.

But what we just read in Matthew, is Jesus blessing and making promises and giving out gifts. Blessed are you. You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world. This is sheer blessing. And, it is about identity, about our very being, which in turn leads to doing. But before the doing is the promise.

Think for a second of the variety of ways in the last couple weeks, that God has used you to be salt and light. (If we were in a small group, I'd give us a moment to think and then share....)

In what way did you encourage someone recently?

How were you faithful to what was expected of you at school or work?

Did you volunteer in a formal way in the past couple weeks?

To whom did you say, "I'll pray for you," and then you did?

Did you make and then keep a promise?

Did you call or email someone you've not seen in a while, to let them know you miss them?

Any of these things may seem, in and of themselves, small. But remember: small is what God often uses to change the world.

You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. And since this is exactly who God made you to be - I invite and encourage you to continue to be salt and light, letting your light shine so that people will see your good works and give thanksgiving and glory to God.

Because if ever there was a time when we needed to be blessed with the gifts of salt and light it's right now. Check the headlines; listen to the news; glance over the social media pages — there is an unusually pervasive sense of disease in our world, and the divisions in our country exist here, among us as well.

Which is where it gets hard, because we won't all agree on what exactly being salt and light looks like.

For some it looks like marching for a purpose or a people.

For others it involves making calls to congressmen and senators

For some it sounds like a voice raised in protest,
For others it sounds like a calm word of encouragement to wait and see.
For some it means shutting down and turning off,
For others it means learning and listening and jumping in.

Whatever it is — we have a unique role and calling as Christians and as the church: To be the place where people gather who may differ on the approach to being salt and light, but commit to pray for deeper understanding, for wisdom, and for courage to speak and act in line with our faith, and for each other.

And to help us in this, we also have these wonderful words of Jesus, where he shows us where God's favor rests, and upon whom he gives his blessing:

The poor in spirit
those who mourn,
the meek,
those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
the merciful,
the pure in heart,
the peacemakers,
Those who are insulted, persecuted and falsely derided because they believe in Jesus

Hear that list again — and think about yourself. Notice which of these qualities describes you these days:

The poor in spirit
those who mourn,
the meek,
those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
the merciful,
the pure in heart,
the peacemakers,
Those who are insulted, persecuted and falsely derided because they believe in Jesus

Because, not just the world out there, but our lives right here are full of these (whether our own lives, or people we know); and because this is a difficult time for many people and for many reasons... We need salt and light in this world. And the crazy thing is that God has already provided it... in and through us.

You are blessed.
You are salt.
You are light.

And as I heard someone say this week - The journey's easier if you go with Jesus.

Amen.