

5 Epiphany – SJ – Salt and Light instead of Law(s)

Matthew 5:13-20 2/6/11

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Doing research on the two dominant images of this morning's gospel passage – salt and light – I learned something of which, as a product of a middle-class upbringing in 20th-century America, I was totally ignorant. The passage speaks of salt and light as ways of describing those who would be Jesus' disciples. He refers to them as the "salt of the earth." Now I know that salt was then, in first-century Israel, as it surely is today, primarily a seasoning used to flavor food, to give it a bit more taste (and that clearly is how our translator has interpreted the reference when we hear the phrase "but if salt has lost its taste"). Which is a little odd, I think, since I've never heard of salt losing its taste. But the Greek word is not so specific, leading the translators of the New International Version to translate the phrase as merely "if the salt has lost its saltiness."

The point is that there are other uses that salt was put to. It was, of course, used to preserve food – still is today, though it was surely far more an important use in a civilization that was particularly warm – and without refrigeration. It was also used to draw the blood out of meat so as to render it kosher. It was, however, also used for a purpose that I had never heard of. And, I learned, it is still used this way in parts of the underdeveloped world. Mixed with dried donkey or camel dung it was a catalyst to permit the dung to burn as if it were wood. Used this way, the salt did, in fact, eventually lose its properties and become good for nothing other than, as Jesus suggests, to be thrown underfoot to provide surer footing, just as it is used in our New England winters – to which today I add a hearty, "Thank God!"

So the salt, when it is actually used to start fires in clay or earth ovens is a direct link to the second metaphor that Jesus uses when he refers to his disciples as the "light of the world." He means us not only to be the catalysts that can start fires, but also to be the light – a product of the fire – that is, to be examples to others of what true discipleship consists of. You will remember the story of the Pharisee in the temple who was so proud to be better than the tax collector; he was someone who would hold himself out to the community as an example to others. Well, here in this morning's gospel there is a bit of a twist on that sort of thought. Jesus wants us not to hide our discipleship, as we would never think of hiding a lamp we have lit under a bushel basket. But it isn't the Pharisee's pride he wants from us, but good works – good works that can serve as an example to all who see them.

We have heard from the Letter to the Ephesians that it is grace, through faith, that saves us, not our works, but the author also adds that we are nonetheless made for good works. In that passage, as in several places in Paul's letters, a contrast is drawn between those who think that salvation comes by adherence to all the rules of the Jewish religion and an assertion that it is, instead, a gift, pure and simple – that is,

that imperfect humans that we are, we cannot earn our way to salvation. But both in those letters and here in Matthew's Gospel we are also reminded that good works are part of discipleship.

Which brings us to what one of the commentaries I consulted refers to as "perhaps the most difficult passage to be found anywhere in the Gospel." Jesus tells his disciples that he hasn't come to "abolish the law or the prophets...but to fulfill." If he means by that that we really need to follow all the laws, that's problem enough if indeed salvation comes through grace, not from following the laws! But it gets even more complicated. "For truly I tell you," he says, "until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." And the passage ends with "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Really? Does he really mean to insist on our obeying all the laws? What distinguished the Pharisees from other members of the first-century Jewish community was their determination to follow not only the 613 laws specified in the Torah but other, unwritten, ones as well. So if Jesus is suggesting that his disciples, and by extension, we, need to do even more than the Pharisees, we're doomed. Indeed, if that's what he means in today's gospel, how do we even begin to explain the fact that, as the Church developed, those who would require converts to become Jews as well as Christians lost the argument, and gentiles who became Christians didn't even need to be circumcised let alone undertake to learn and follow all those laws?

The answer to this seeming paradox is not straightforward. Although it sounds like Jesus is saying that all those 613 plus laws are still in effect, the fact that he says he has come to fulfill the law shifts our analysis away from the laws articulated in the Torah to Jesus himself. Let me illustrate why this is so by looking briefly at another context – the relationship between Jesus and the temple in Jerusalem as articulated in John's Gospel. A professor of mine, Sandra Schneiders, in her book *Written That You May Believe* has something to say that I think is relevant to our problem: "The temple is the community," she writes, "the risen body of Jesus, which has replaced his earthly body, the temple destroyed by his enemies. Out of that temple will flow, as it flowed from the side of Jesus on the cross, the living water of the spirit." In other words, in her view, when Jesus tossed the moneychangers out of the temple's courtyard, it was ultimately because that temple, the one built of stone, was no longer necessary, and when Jesus predicted that it would be destroyed only to rise again in three days, he was referring to himself – to his own resurrection. The temple made of stone will be gone, but in the risen Christ the temple will be restored. So also here in today's gospel passage, the law the Pharisees strive to follow will not be destroyed but reinterpreted in and by Jesus himself.

One of my favorite passages from Matthew's Gospel is directly on this point:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

The law and, most assuredly, the prophets, who keep reminding the Jewish people that they are failing to live up to God's standards, are not just presenting us a lot of rules and regulations, like a state's criminal code. Rather together their offerings comprise a broad statement about how a good life ought to be lived. If we merely follow rules we miss Jesus' point altogether.

Philosopher and theologian Peter Rollins illustrates this principle in his disarming and thought-provoking little book *The Orthodox Heretic* by reminding us of Jesus' injunction that if a soldier requests someone to carry his pack a mile, which, in that world a Roman soldier certainly could, the one he asks ought to carry it two. He imagines a group of Christians who take this admonition so literally that they form a community of people the Roman soldiers actually hope to encounter since they know they can always get two miles out of them. But "what if," Rollins asks, "Jesus was not offering his followers an ethical system to follow, but rather was inviting them to enter into a life of love that transcends ethics, a life of liberty that dwells beyond religious laws?" Rollins further imagines Jesus returning and saying to this community of followers:

Dear brothers and sisters, you are faithful and honest, but I have come to you with a second message, for you have failed to understand the first. Your law says that you must carry a pack for two miles. My law says, "carry it for three."

When they carry the packs for two miles, Rollins is implying that these followers are merely following a new regulation. The first, the Roman one, required them to carry the pack "one mile," the second, the one they themselves have substituted, instead requires "two." But, Rollins concludes: "The way of love provides a way when ethical demands have had their say or do not know what to say. Is this not what Jesus was calling us to? – to live beyond the law so as to fulfill it."

We may well add, is this not what it means to satisfy the two greatest commandments, to love both God and neighbor, as Jesus would have us do? If we do, in fact, truly live our lives in this manner, that is, not by but beyond the law, we shall surely be the salt of the earth that may serve as catalyst to light up the world.

AMEN