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Sermon: Become What You Are
Scripture: Matthew 5:13-20
February 5, 2023
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13 “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

14 “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter,^[a] not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks^[b] one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Through Christ’s eyes, we are not only seen, but are told we are complete and fulfilling our calling before we have ever done anything, achieved anything, failed at anything, or known how we are going to turn out, Jesus has seen us as we are, and called us to get to living and becoming what he has already seen in us. Jesus is not just about a new teaching and variation on the mountaintop, he is not trying to establish a different kind of fulfillment of religion and new form of God’s law, Jesus is not about spiritual enlightenment or reeling off wise sayings, but he gathers his disciples on the mountaintop in order to form a community. Jesus’ whole point is not to create honor students or a small group of Christian overachievers, but he comes to form a community and our passage today is at the heart of it. The missionary and theologian of mission Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that Jesus did not write a book, he formed a community. Jesus did not spend his days writing, but meeting people wherever they are and helping them find their vocation, their place, their voice, and the ways they could effect others and flavor the world around them for his sake. Jesus came to form a community that does not exist for itself or its own religious pleasure, but a community that exists for the world, to offer the beloved community of Christ’s kingdom to the whole world.

Sometimes, I wish he had written a book we could just read and digest instead on our own, or he just said some of the things we pretend like he said anyway, ‘just adore and love me in the privacy of our individual hearts,’ or ‘I only promise you endless bliss,’ or ‘follow me and you will never have problems,’ or ‘the point of life is to win at life and achieve success in all that you do,’ and find fulfillment in how all the ways you define your

needs.' Weirdly, Jesus does not try to sell us anything at all here. No, he does not even say something like 'if you live a good life, and don't lie, cheat, and steal, then you might be worthy to be called the light of the world and salt of the earth and enter into the eternal favor of God. No self-improvement. No promise of moral change for the better. No explanation of the benefit package or bottom line. I would prefer that to what Jesus does. Instead, he tells us he already sees us as redeemed and invites us to radiate his redemption to others.

The well known 19th century German philosopher and atheist Frederick Nietzsche once remarked how unimpressed he was with the credentials and thus and so-ness of the Christians he observed. 'They would have to sing better songs to make me believe in their Redeemer: his disciples would have to look more redeemed!' ¹ To Nietzsche, and to most observers most of the time, Christians just don't look very redeemed, whether he means our ordinariness, our arbitrariness, or our sometimes morally bankrupt-ness, the redeemed of the Lord just don't look it or seem to act it. And believe me, Nietzsche was not the first to notice this.

And yet what is interesting to me is that the only person or figure in our scripture lesson who sees you and me and this community as anything more than hypocrites or moral failures or underachievers is Jesus. He doesn't say do x, y, and z, and then you have a real good shot at becoming the light of the world—he doesn't say, live a good life, look redeemed, and follow these other 3 steps, and then you might have a chance to become the salt of the earth. No, he says, you are already these things, not go and live like it. That is where he starts. He leads with you are the light of the world and you are the salt of the earth. You are already these things. Don't waste it. Become it.

Part of the beauty and miracle and the stunning nature of Jesus Christ is he sees us already as the light of the world and the salt of the earth, even when what we and what others see in each other and in ourselves often feels pretty dim and not very salty at all. Part of the miracle of faith and the miracle of God's entry into the world in Christ is that Christ looks at us and says you are redeemed even when the other voices around us may be saying, 'you've got more work to do,' 'you don't look very redeemed to me,' 'you're not there yet,' or 'you are going to have to sing better songs and look a bit more redeemed for me to buy in.' But right at the beginning, right after the call to discipleship, before heading out into ministry, before going to Jerusalem, before crucifixion, passion,

¹ Nietzsche, (Thus Spake Zarathustra), quoted by Hans Küng in *The Church* from Migloire, 'The New Community,' in *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 187.

death, and resurrection, Jesus already says 'you are the light of the world.' This is who you are. This is what I see when I look at you. I don't see the self-doubt. I don't see the cynicism. I don't see the assessments of others we take too seriously. I don't see your own preference to self-indulge and keep the light to yourselves. When I look at my disciples, when I look at this community, when I look at you, says Jesus, the first thing I see is the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

You are already fully alive and have been given everything you need to reach fulfilment in Christ's eyes. There is nothing more to acquire, nothing more to gain, nothing more to earn, nothing more to attain; yet the purpose of salt and the purpose of light is never fulfilled by seeking inner enlightenment alone or refusing to use God-given gifts to effect others. We never reach fulfillment by grasping or acquisition or even self-seeking, we never find out what life is all about that way, but by giving ourselves to something greater that we flourish and find true life. As Jesus says elsewhere, 'in seeking life beyond our lives,' in giving ourselves to things beyond our own immediate whims and desires, 'we find our lives.'² Roman Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh puts it this way, citing the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians: 'Christ did not grasp at power but emptied himself and took the form of a servant and slave....Pope Francis has warned of the church's 'spiritual worldliness' which puts a religious and pious veneer over the desire for power and influence, over vanity and even pride and arrogance.' Pope Francis reminds us that the church is only free when 'centered in the self-giving of her Lord.' Cavanaugh goes on quoting the martyred saint Oscar Romero that the church's strength is not found in the hitching of our wagon to the powerful or the opportune political leader, but the church 'advances with noble detachment.'³

Back to Nietzsche...he is right in a lot of ways. It is a fool's errand to believe that it is possible for the Christian community to be superior to everyone else because of our morals or our piety or even our stand on all the issues. And I would just add that is not the point anyway. 'They shall know we are Christians by our love, by our love,' sounds self-effacing, but is actually arrogant. In the words of Old Testament theologian Jim Wharton, 'every attempt to ground the rightness of the church in the superiority of the historic life-style of Christians is

² Richard J. Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 124.

³ William Cavanaugh, 'I had to learn to love the church,' in *The Christian Century* (June 7, 2021).

fundamentally flawed, on theological grounds, right from the start. Christianity cannot be regarded as a superior religion because Christians turn out to be superior people.⁴ To make the case that we are somehow superior to other human beings, Wharton reminds us, is a denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ, a denial of the humanity Christ has already redeemed. In another vein, Lutheran turned Roman Catholic Richard Neuhaus reminds us that the church does not and should not pretend that we are a community in which all 'alienation is overcome, loneliness is banished, all disagreements harmonized, and all of us are perfectly integrated into a common consciousness and cause.' Neuhaus cautions that such a community reflects 'not the terrible love of God but the self-indulgent mush of conformity and false-consciousness.'⁵ The wonder of the church is that we are most truly ourselves, not when we have reached some level of superficial going along to get along or internal harmony as nice as that is, but when we are lost in wonder, love, and praise, when we are pointing away from ourselves to our radiate center in Jesus Christ, when we are self-forgetful long enough to give ourselves over to the flourishing of others no matter what is going on in our lives at the moment. According to our passage from Matthew, we are at our best and most truly ourselves, when we are reflecting Christ's light and flavoring his world with the salt of his gospel. Not something that can happen on our own or even by willing ourselves to it.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. That is not just a hopeful sentiment or encouraging uplift, it is a declaration of reality, it is a statement of what is true. Whatever we mean about the 'real world,' the real world is the world where we are able to reflect Christ's light beautifully and flavor Christ's world tastefully. The world where Jesus sees us as we truly are. Everything else is passing. Everything else is transitory. Everything else is counterfeit. Grace is the gift to see ourselves as Christ already sees us, to live in this world as Christ has empowered us, grace is the joy of giving others the life we have already been given in Christ. Not because we are superior people or because we are more righteous or just, but because in the mystery of Christian community, Christ has used us, in all our fragile and flawed and broken humanity, to reflect his light and to flavor the world around us for his sake. The light we reflect and the salt we flavor is a glimpse of God's love for all fragile and flawed and broken human beings, not a love that we have mastered, but rather a love that

⁴ James A. Wharton, *Three Confidences*, in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, 119.

⁵ Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 126.

continues to master us, to disrupt us, to disturb us, to challenge us, to fascinate us, and a love that continues to draw near to us, inspiring our 'hearts to faith, our minds to truth, and our wills to faithful discipleship.'⁶ Not so that everyone will know we are Christians or be impressed by our credentials or moral positions or even our love, but so that everyone might know the difference the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ makes in this world for the sake of all humanity. Not just so that we might become the fully alive humanity we already are in Christ, but so that *all* may become what they already are in Him light of the world and salt of the earth. Amen.

⁶ James A. Wharton, *Three Confidences*, in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, 120.