

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 5, 2023

Be Salty¹

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A dear friend of ours is an elementary school teacher which means we regularly hear firsthand accounts of life in that difficult profession. The challenges teachers today face can feel insurmountable at times, and we try to be a safe place for this friend to vent. One of the themes we've heard in her venting is a growing frustration at how often children are determined to be "problems" that need "fixing." This language is distressing because it expresses a stance towards some children that reduces them to a "problem" rather than seeing them as whole and complete human beings who may be struggling with things we don't even realize.

This reductionist attitude seems to crop up a lot in American society if you look for it. Recent layoffs in the tech industry have illustrated how corporate leadership generally views employees, the people who actually produce things and create value, as little more than numbers in spread sheets. Many of these layoffs were determined entirely by algorithms and data points. It has become quite easy to ignore the humanity of the people around us and reduce them to less than the whole beings that they are.

Last week I preached about how the murder of Tyre Nichols was possible, in part, because those police officers did not see him as human. That is yet another example of this propensity we seem to have developed for ignoring the humanity of others. The outcome in that situation was grievous, but any sort of dehumanizing of others is terrible. It is taking the humanity out of humans. It's taking saltiness out of salt.

That's what Jesus is getting at in this teaching today. We are making our way slowly through Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount. It started off with the beatitudes, that powerful teaching about how God's values upend human values. And don't forget, the beatitudes follow Christ's call to repent

¹ Credit where credit is due, this sermon was inspired by a conversation with my wife, as often happens.

and his calling of the first disciples. Jesus, in this powerful sermon, is articulating what followers of his Way can expect.

It all begins with an encounter with the Word of God, Jesus Christ. This encounter often results in something of a crisis for the would-be follower. Ideally, this crisis will lead to repentance, an earnest desire to think differently. The encounter for the first disciples was compelling enough to get them to think different and then live different; dropping their nets and immediately following Jesus. Christ then goes on to describe the values of God that are the values of his Way too. Followers are invited to think and live differently: valuing the kingdom of heaven over competition, meekness over strength, reconciliation over retribution, peace over violence, and the single minded pursuit of righteousness. This different thinking and living leads to a foretaste of God's kingdom, blessings upon blessings.

Jesus ends this description with the warning that thinking and living differently will put you at odds with the world. But that is to be expected! Following the Way of Christ means being salty when the world tells you to let go of your saltiness. Be righteous...live as you were created to live...be fully human! That's what this entire sermon is about to my mind...being human...or at least being the humanity we were created to be.

We can see the effects of denying the humanity of others, denying their saltiness if you will. It is terribly harmful to dehumanize others. It harms the victim, and it also chips away at the humanity of the victimizer too. There is no quicker way to lose one's own humanity than to dehumanize your neighbor. Of course, those dehumanized suffer far worse, often enduring physical, mental, or emotional damage long after the experience. But damage is done to the perpetrator too, as well as to creation at large. Nothing good comes from dehumanizing others. And yet it still happens, and more frequently than we realize.

Salt cannot lose its saltiness. If it has it is only because it is no longer salt. NaCl, sodium chloride, that's all salt is. It can only be other than that if some foreign substance is introduced to it. It retains its saltiness only so long as it remains sodium chloride. Now humans are a bit more complex than salt, granted. But the point remains the same, we are human so long as we can recognize humanity in ourselves and in others. But once we start to lose that ability, once we become too conditioned to not seeing or acknowledging humanity in others then we begin to lose our own humanity. At that point we are unrighteous, we are no longer living as we were created to live.

Recognizing the humanity in others can begin in a variety of different ways, but in the end they all involve some recognition of the inherent dignity in the other. And from our Christian perspective, that recognition means seeing the image of God in the face of the people around us. Living righteously then, living as we were created to live, means being fully human and supporting one another in our shared humanity. Living righteously means fulfilling every letter, every stroke of every letter, of the Law.

What Law? The Law that Jesus will go on to articulate in the rest of this sermon. The Law that involves mercy and forgiveness,² guarding your thoughts as well as actions,³ keeping your promises,⁴ not seeking revenge and instead loving your enemies,⁵ being generous to those in need,⁶ attending to your relationship with God,⁷ standing in solidarity with the needy,⁸ serving God over wealth or worry,⁹ not judging others,¹⁰ and treating others the way we wish to be treated.¹¹ We can keep none of these if we do not recognize the humanity of those around us. From this perspective we can see that breaking the Law, sinning, begins with either not recognizing God's divinity or not recognizing our neighbor's humanity.

Righteous living cannot be hidden away. This is mostly, I think, because it is so rare in this world. It's far easier for us to stay asleep and serve our own desires over walking the Way. My life is generally quieter and more comfortable when I'm not trying to be fully human. Assigning people to convenient boxes and treating them as nothing more than the labels I've given them makes my life a lot simpler. Granted, that life is shallow, unfulfilling, and mean; but it lets us be lazy, and we humans love to be lazy!

Being fully human, pursuing righteousness, makes the world far more complex. Recognizing that the people around me are whole humans, always more than the labels I've assigned them, always more complex than I want to consider, make life messier quickly. But it also makes life more true, more abundant, more full. Who have you labeled and inadvertently dehumanized? And are you willing to recognize their humanity instead of their labels?

² Matthew 5:21-26

³ Matthew 5:27-30

⁴ Matthew 5:31-37

⁵ Matthew 5:38-48

⁶ Matthew 6:1-4

⁷ Matthew 6:5-15

⁸ Matthew 6:16-21

⁹ Matthew 6:24-34

¹⁰ Matthew 7:1-5

¹¹ Matthew 7:12

Given the state of our world today, I'm not sure there's anything greater that Christianity has to offer than this teaching of Christ's sermon on the Mount: an acknowledgment of the complexity of humanity. Joining in Christ's call to see even our enemies as full human beings, having inherent dignity and bearing the image of God. Calling the cosmos to Walk the Way of Christ, the Way of the recognition of shared humanity, the Way of connection, community, acceptance, and love.

Be salty my siblings in Christ. Be salty by trying to see the humanity around you. Catch yourself from calling, or even thinking of, others as a "problem" or a "threat" or "less than" or "unacceptable." Try to avoid all the labels we love to assign. And instead think of others as complex, messy, beautiful, mysterious humans who bear a spark of the divine, who bear the image of God. I wish this world were more salty, more human...so go be human, be humanity, be righteous, be who God created you to be. Amen.