

**Sunday, February 9, 2020 | Journey and Sanctuary worship services**

**TEXT: [Matthew 5:13–20](#)**

**TITLE: You Are/I Am**

*By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy*

Today's passage is a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that began with the Beatitudes on which Pastor Heather preached last Sunday. In the earlier verses of Matthew 5, Jesus describes the characteristics of those deemed as blessed and shared what they would gain in the end time. Jesus unequivocally states that blessed are: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, and reviled, and have all kinds of evil uttered falsely against them on his account. Jesus says that those individuals will receive the kingdom of heaven, be comforted, filled, receive mercy, see God, be called the children of God, and should rejoice and be glad for their reward is great in heaven.

Jesus shined a spotlight on the characteristics and actions his followers would exhibit and live, that they might have knowledge and claim their identity. However, knowledge of who you, who we are and claiming our God-given identity without living it, putting it into action, is another thing entirely. So, Jesus continues his sermon using analogies that would be easily understood by his audience, by stating that collectively, "You are the salt of the earth." In the ancient Greek world salt was highly valued. The Romans had a saying (*Nil utilius sole et sale*) "There is nothing more useful than sun and salt."

Salt had three special qualities in the minds of ancient people. Salt was glistening white and came from the sun and sea, therefore it was considered the essence of purity and was often offered up to the gods. Described as salt of the earth, Jesus connoted that his followers are the essence of purity. Secondly, salt was a common preservative in the ancient world. It was used to keep things from going bad, from spoiling, from becoming corrupt. Likewise, Christ's followers are to have an antiseptic or sanitizing influence on life. But the most obvious and greatest quality of salt was and is, is that it brings out and gives flavor to things. Food without a little seasoning is not worth eating.

Christians adds flavor to life. Sadly, some Christians espouse the exact opposite, and by doing so have become dull, insipid, tasteless, or lack vigor. Some Christians have become less than pure or truthful turning a blind eye to injustice, criminal behavior, and sin; and some Christians have become so wretched and so fixated on their person agendas that they are willing to compromise and go along with anything and support anyone.

For the third time in the history of the United States, a president has been impeached. The two charges of misconduct were levied against the president were abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. I'm not going to belabor or rehash the allegations, the trial or the outcome. However, upon the acquittal of the president, rather than expressing humility, contrition or thankfulness that he was found not guilty, the president has alleged that he was judged unfairly, mistreated, falsely accused, and maligned.

Enacting retribution, the president began a reign of terror last week—turning the annual congressional prayer breakfast, traditionally a bi-partisan event into a contentious campaign rally; touting his “exoneration” at a press conference he using expletives to describe the impeachment process; declaring that the people he perceived as political opponents as evil and corrupt; and he enacted his version of the “Saturday Night Massacre” by firing the ambassador he assigned to the European Union and unfairly ending the careers of several government officials.

The president’s is behavior and the behavior of those who support him and offer excuses for his untraditional, uncouth, improper actions are not examples of what Jesus was speaking about in his sermon on the mount. There was nothing godly or blessed or positive about the behavior of the president and others before, during or after the impeachment. If I could use my sanctified imagination, I believe God is asking Jesus and Holy Spirit, what is going on down there? Whether we support the current president or not, as Christians, the salt of the earth, we are called to stand up for what is righteous, just, pure, peaceful, and to call to account anything and anyone who doesn’t do the same. Otherwise, we have lost our saltiness, our flavor and are good for nothing—those are Jesus’ words.

Jesus continues, “You are the light of the world.” This could be considered the greatest compliment ever expressed about Christians. By making that statement, this Jesus likens us to himself when he states: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life (John 8:12). Jesus’ command that we are the light of the world demands that we be nothing less than he is.

Again, Jesus was using an expression that was familiar to his audience. According to one commentator, “One thing Jews were very sure of – people never kindled their own light. ‘God lit Israel’s lamp.’ The light with which the nation or the people of God shone was a borrowed light. So, it must be with Christians. It is not the demand of Jesus that we should produce our own light. We must shine with the reflection of his light...the radiance of Christians comes from the essence of Christ within the Christian heart.” (William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1*, [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], 141)

Just as light is meant to be seen, so are we. There is no such thing as a secret disciple or follower of Christ. In secrecy, our Christian witness is destroyed and cheapened. Conversely, when our Christianity is active, our witness destroys our secrecy. Visible, light-shining discipleship is not meant for inside the walls of the church, nor should be deposited in a receptacle when we leave the building. Our lights are meant to shine everywhere we go. Shine by the way we treat people regardless of where we may be; by the way we treat our colleagues and employees; by the way we act on the playing field or in the stands; by the way we drive or park our cars; in the language we use and the material we read.

As lights in the world we are guides making the way clear to others, we are channels for goodness, standing for righteousness, and justice, peace, and equity. Even if you don’t

agree with his politics, Mitt Romney was such a person who stood up and based on his faith would vote his conscience last week, despite the potential consequences. In a world where many don't have or exhibit the moral strength and courage to do what is right, we are commanded as light to do the right thing, and to encourage and compel others to do the same.

Lights can also be warning signals, telling us to halt, danger is ahead. There are times when our duty as Christians is to warn others in love. This can be difficult to do, to tell someone they are on the wrong path, have the wrong attitude, are making wrong decisions. But if we can't tell the truth in love and guide someone back to the right path, what good are we?

February has been set aside to celebrate Black History Month. And I'm thankful that at least once every year, we shine light on the fact that this country became great on the backs, blood, sweat, and lives of men, women and children of African descent who were stolen, imprisoned, robbed of their country, heritage, personhood, and dignity, and enslaved in a foreign and strange land. Every year, we lift-up well-known black persons whose good works have been recorded in history—Sojourner Truth, Harriett Tubman, Mary Mcleod Bethune, Richard Allen, George Washington Carver, and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, and rightfully so.

Yet, we fail to tell the truth and shed light on the ugliest part of our shared history and that still negatively impacts black lives and families today. The separation of families at the auction block or sold away to fund a struggling plantation; slaves beaten just to the point of death, because they dared to try to escape. We don't acknowledge, tell the truth or shed light on the terror and trauma that have become part of the DNA of black people. We don't tell the truth or shed light on the dual sin of the commodification and devaluation of black lives still evident today every time a black life is taken, or a black body is wrongfully incarcerated, or a black addict is treated as a criminal rather than someone with an illness, or when black children receive inadequate educations and don't have access to higher education. In the words of Celie in the Color Purple, "Until you do right by me, by us, no good is going to come to you."

Jesus said, we are salty and lit and when our lives genuinely exemplify and possess the blessed qualities which Jesus taught in the Beatitudes, we add value, preservation and flavor to life and shine light into dark, inequitable, and unrighteous places. Jesus said, I am the light, I am the fulfillment of the law, I am truth, peace, justice and righteousness personified.

Including and expanding on the Isaiah 58 passage read by Rev. Terri, God's glory and heaven are realized on earth *"When you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the*

*breach, the restorer of streets to live in. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am."*

Beloved, you are, we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, because Christ is the great I am. Amen.