

The “How” and the “Why”

February 9, 2020

Matthew 5:13-20

During my time in New Orleans as a Chaplain Intern, one of my weekly tasks was to write a verbatim report of an interaction I had with someone at the hospital. It could be a patient, a patient’s family member, a staff, anyone, but it had to be someone at the hospital, it had to be during that week, and it had to be a word-for-word recollection (or at least as best as I could recall) of that conversation. In that report, not only did I have to report on what was said when, but emotions expressed either by me or the subject, and I had to provide explanations as to why I felt a certain way or said something at any given point in the conversation. While a somewhat tedious task at first, I eventually started to see the value in doing it: not only did it cause me to self-reflect and come to a better understanding about myself, but it helped to keep me in check, that I might actually improve on my pastoral care skills.

As it turns out, this is a useful skill to have. Keeping one’s self in check, knowing the reasoning behind a certain action, is one of the major points Jesus makes in the section of the “Sermon on the Mount” we just read. In fact, it’s his closing point: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Well, the scribes and Pharisees were very high up there on the zealous food chain. They were the top dogs, making decisions and casting judgments as they deemed fit. So, this sounds like a tall order, but in fact, it isn’t. We have here a warning against following in the footsteps of the so-called religious leaders of that time, because theirs is a self-proclaimed righteousness. I spoke some weeks ago about Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, where the Pharisee is standing up and boasting of all he does (fasting twice a week and giving a certain percentage of all he has), while the tax collector stands far off and just prays for forgiveness for his sins. This boasting is what Jesus speaks against here. The Pharisees followed rules for their own self-glorification. They did not follow these rules because God so commands they be followed; they did it to elevate themselves and gain positions of power and authority. Here, Jesus speaks of being more righteous than those who self-proclaim and flaunt their righteousness, which is to say, Jesus speaks of being truly righteous, doing what is called for by the commandments for the glorification of God rather than one’s own glorification. So, the question then becomes, “how do we do that?” How do we be more righteous than the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus’ time?

The answer is found in the beginning of this passage. Jesus instructs all there to first be the “salt of the earth.” In the modern day, we understand salt as being something to add flavor to food, just as it was used in the Bible. However, we see salt used in different contexts than just dining in the Bible as well. For example, Elisha uses salt to make a spring “wholesome” again, which can be interpreted as giving salt a purifying or “life-giving” quality. The Gospel of Luke even has Jesus talking about salt that has lost its taste as “fit neither for the soil nor the manure pile.” Here, we have Jesus speaking of salt as something that enriches the soil, as a fertilizer and nourisher of the earth. So, this instruction to be “salt of the earth” then, we can draw from it the conclusion that we as disciples are to enrich the earth in preparation for the “good news,” that we

are to enrich it as salt does food, earth and springs, and to transform it as the salt Elisha used restored the spring to functionality. This however is only the first part of the answer of “how.”

The other part of the answer of “how do we do this” is being “the light of the world.” In the darkness, light is very easily seen, and should it be hidden, it loses its purpose. We see this metaphor for light reflected in other readings for today. In Isaiah 58, it speaks of light shining when the oppressed are freed, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the homeless are sheltered, and the afflicted are helped. In Psalm 112, the psalmist talks of those who are righteous, gracious, merciful, who give freely to the poor, and those who fight for justice as “rising in the darkness.” In all of these passages, we have righteousness spoken of as “light,” as something that is very hard to hide, that loses its purpose if hidden, and as something that is “unconditional.” In other words, it doesn’t pick who or what to shine upon, just as the Sun does not choose to shine on one planet or one country but not another. Rather, its rays reach every person, place, and thing in its path. Just as with light, the stronger the righteousness (i.e. the greater the expression of God’s love and spirit in a given person), the further it will be seen, the wider the effect it will have. Thus, we are called to show forth the light of Christ in all that we do and say and not to hinder it either by hoarding it for one’s self or by selecting who is “worthy” of such a light.

Referring back to last week’s reading for a second, Jesus blessed those who are disciples (i.e. those who love kindness, walk humbly with God, and do justice). Those who are kind, humble, and just (e.g. Mother Theresa, Fred Rogers, Desmond Tutu, etc.), I doubt there are many out there who would argue that they didn’t/don’t enrich the lives of those around them or that those persons “lights” were/are not seen. While we might not be nuns, archbishops, or children’s show hosts, we are nonetheless challenged to share the light of Christ with the world that all who see it might be enriched, just as we have been enriched. At the same time though, we must also be aware of our reasoning for sharing it, because if we share it for our own benefit, that light gets put under the metaphorical “bushel basket” and is therein hindered. So, as you go forward today, I invite you all to consider with whom you share the light of Christ and why you do it.