

January 27, 2019 – (Epiphany 3, The Beatitudes)

Sermon Text – Matthew 5:1-20

- "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. "You are the light of the world...No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 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. -

When we left off last week, Jesus had just begun his public ministry. The first thing out of his mouth is a word-for-word restatement of John the Baptist's preaching. "Repent," he says, "the kingdom of heaven has come near." Then, in our lesson for today, he goes up on a mountain, sits down in the position of a teacher, and begins to proclaim blessings on the people he sees gathered around him. Blessed are the poor in spirit...the mourning...the meek...the seekers of righteousness...the merciful...the pure in heart...the makers of peace...the persecuted. Blessed are all those people, the people who aren't very much valued or loved by the world around us, the people who seem to be left out, knocked down, forgotten, discarded, detested, despised, burdened, beset, beleaguered, oppressed, ostracized, and overloaded. They're not the powerful, the popular, the potent, the persuasive, the rich, the famous, the honored and the impressive. They are not the ones highly esteemed by the world in which we live. They are not the ones we would expect to be called blessed. But, here's the thing. Jesus is pronouncing them blessed, blessing them, in the act of naming them as the recipients of his beatitudes. He's saying, in effect, "the kingdom of heaven has come near," and here it is, all around me, in each one of you, who are hearing my words.

This the first bit of Jesus' teaching. I'm always interested in the first things and the last in any major presentation. Why? Because they often give you a clue to what the whole lot in between is really about. In chapter 25, Matthew will present the last pieces of Jesus' teaching, before he gets down to relating the story of Jesus' final days, concluding with his suffering, death and resurrection. The last parable that Jesus tells is the Parable of the Final Judgement. It's the one about separating the sheep from the goats according to how they have responded to Jesus' presence in their lives. The sheep are rewarded for their righteousness in caring for the hungry and the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and imprisoned. The

goats, on the other hand, have not done so well. They have not cared for the hungry and thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked or visited the sick and the imprisoned. The key sentence, as I'm sure you remember, is this: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." The sheep have done it without ever realizing that they were serving Jesus. The goats have not done it because they have never realized that Jesus was even there. That's where the two great teachings seem to intersect – the first and the last – because the ones "who are the least members of Jesus' family, are the very ones whom he was blessing way back there in the very beginning of his ministry?" If you want to be part of the kingdom, then serve these people, bless these people, take care of these people, because they are the people of God, the members of God's heavenly kingdom.

When Jesus is done with his blessings, he turns to the very same people he has just blessed with two more major pronouncements. "You are the salt of the earth," and "You are the light of the world." Think about those two elements for a moment – salt and light. They are both immensely important. They are both found almost everywhere. And they are both necessary for life. In fact, scientists are now theorizing that salt and light, along with their third colleague, water, may have been critical in the process of God's creation of life itself. Oh, there's a few life forms that live without direct sunlight, but that doesn't mean they don't benefit from the light in other ways. I don't really want to talk about salt and light so much, but to focus on what it is that they do in the world. Salt is a seasoning. It makes food taste better. It also serves as a regulator, balancing the proportions of fluids inside our bodies. And it's an aid to safety, melting the ice on our roads and our sidewalks. And it's a medicine, helping to clean and disinfect our mouths and soothe our sore throats. Light is an energizer. It powers such processes as photosynthesis in plants and the making of electricity when it falls on the photovoltaic cells that seem to keep springing up in the fields along the roads wherever I travel. It also warms the atmosphere and heats up greenhouses and helps our bodies to produce vitamin D. And, like the salt, it can melt the snow and remove the ice and it helps us to see, even in the midst of the darkness.

And Jesus' statement says that that is what you do. Notice he says, "You are the salt of the earth," and "You are the light of the world." He doesn't say, "Be the salt" or "Be light." He says, "You are salt," and "You are light," just like "You are the blessed." That's who you are because you belong to God, because God made you that way, because God chose you to be one of God's children in the world and one of the members of God's heavenly kingdom. You were meant to be salt, to season the world around you, to make it a tastier place in which to live, to get into the cracks between

people and balance out the powers that pull them this way and that, to melt away the dangers that threaten their lives, and to soothe the aches and to reduce the soreness of a hurting and wounded world. You were meant to be light, to shine into the darkness and illuminate the places from which hardship and injustice seem to originate, to bring energy and warmth to a world that would otherwise be cold and lifeless, and to be a benefit to all with whom you come into contact in any way possible. In other words, you are of great value. And just think of all the many ways the gift you are and the gifts you offer impact the world. And, in spite of what Jesus said, salt never actually loses its taste. It could leech out of its container, leaving behind only an saltless residue; but, salt is only 'useless' when it is not used. So, if it stays in the shaker, never gets out of the bag, or remains on the truck, it does nothing to affect the world around it. And who would ever really hide a light under a bushel? To do so is to either snuff out the light or to set the basket on fire. Either way, the results are a disaster. Better to keep the light burning brightly and illuminate the world around you than to take such a chance.

Oh, you don't have to buy into all of this. You don't have to accept the Beatitudes as a description of the people who make up the kingdom of heaven. You don't have to agree with Jesus' pronouncements about you being salt and light. In fact, you can reject all of that and stick with measuring yourself by the world's standards. Maybe success is the way to go for you. Maybe wealth and status and power make you out to be one of the top dogs in our world. Maybe that's all you really need. But I ask you, what happens then, when you become poor in spirit, when you mourn, when you are meek, when you seek after righteousness, when you choose mercy, when you are pure in heart, when you long for peace, when you become the persecuted? What then? The world has no answer for you. It can only paste a big "L" on your forehead and pity the fact that you haven't been able to measure up to its standards of success. In the final section of our lesson, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill," or, in my translation, "I have come not to abolish [the law] but to bring [it] to its completion." Until that happens, it's all still there, every last tiny letter of it, and it will never change. Choose to measure your life by those standards, and you are going to have a very hard time measuring up. The keeping of the law is a cruel taskmaster. It will be relentless, and your best efforts will never be enough. So, listen to me. This is a new way. This is the kingdom way. This is the way that blesses all of you, even when you don't measure up. This is the way that calls you salt and light just for seasoning and lighting up the world. This is the way that puts you at the center of God's love as God's beloved children powered by the Spirit and forgiven in Christ.

Amen.