

July 17, 2022

A Different Taste

Matthew 5:10-16, 38-47

Because the sermon today is taken from scattered bits and pieces of the Sermon on the Mount, our reading today is from somewhere completely different. We read from the first chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes, verses 2-11:

- ² Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
- ³ What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?
- ⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.
- ⁵ The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.
- ⁶ The wind blows to the south, and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.
- ⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.
- ⁸ All things are wearisome; more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.
- ⁹ What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.
- ¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See, this is new’?
It has already been, in the ages before us.
- ¹¹ The people of long ago are not remembered,
nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the greatest bodies of religious and moral teaching ever given. It’s the longest single collection of Jesus’ teaching that we have, all of Matthew five through seven. In fact it’s so long that many think it wasn’t given at one time, but is sort of a collection of all Jesus’ greatest words. Doesn’t matter. Either way, this body of teaching is powerful, incredible – sometimes shocking. Yes, that’s right. Shocking. We hear sometimes about “shocking new revelations” concerning Jesus Christ – usually referring to some ancient manuscript that has been known of for generations and that isn’t particularly revelatory, but someone’s selling it as a bombshell new discovery – but we don’t have to go outside the Bible to be shocked. Just read the Sermon on the Mount, really read what it says, and you’ll be astonished. I read once about a bishop in the Middle Ages who, after he was installed in his episcopacy, decided he ought to get around to reading the Gospels. (These days I think they check that first.) Anyway, when this bishop read the Sermon on the Mount, his stunned response was: “Either this is not the gospel, or we are not Christians.”

So I’d like us to spend the next month together in this shocking sermon. Because there’s so much here, we’re not going to even try to go verse by verse, but instead pull out a few recurring themes, and today I’d like to begin with half of one verse, **5:13a**. “*You are the salt of*

the earth.” We use that phrase sometimes today to mean “an upstanding, dependable sort” – “He’s a great guy, the salt of the earth” – but that’s not exactly what Jesus is doing here. In this sermon, he’s talking primarily to his closest followers, saying “You – my disciples – are like salt to the earth.” What does this mean? Well, what does salt do? Salt is the stuff that makes bland, unappetizing food edible. It’s what changes routine fare into something worthwhile. That’s what we, Christ’s disciples, are supposed to be doing to our routine, unappetizing world.

And yes, our world is relentlessly bland. The passage from Ecclesiastes that we read a minute ago puts it very bluntly: “*All things are wearisome . . . What has been is what will be . . . There is nothing new under the sun.*” And, to a large extent, that’s true. People are going to be selfish, greedy, and obsessed with the same worthless things their parents and grandparents were obsessed with: material things, fame, power, and so on. It never changes. Every four years in America, we have a presidential campaign and are promised that this time things will be different, and after every election, it isn’t. Everything that human nature touches follows the same weary, repetitive pattern. As a result, we pretend. We go to great lengths to act as if we’re different, but even that backfires on us. Teenagers declare that they’re going to be *different* from their parents, so they go out and get something pierced – thus becoming exactly the same as millions of other *different* teens. Adults aren’t any wiser. We try to stand out in the crowd by – well, by buying stuff – the *latest* stuff. *Different* electronic gadgets, *different* cars, *different* houses in *different* neighborhoods, neighborhoods where all the houses have the same gadgets and cars and are just like the others. “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher . . . there is nothing new under the sun.” We humans would be laughable if we weren’t so boring.

And in this unappetizing soup, we Christians, Jesus says, are supposed to be the salt, the thing that stands out, that gives flavor. How? How do we do that? How about this: **5:38-42** (‘*You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*’) Now *that’s* different. Someone hits you and you let them do it again? Without resisting? Jesus doesn’t really mean that, does he? I think so – after all, it’s what he did. And this coat and cloak business. That doesn’t sound so bad to us – we all have more clothes than we need – but the people Jesus was talking to only had one garment and it was probably the most valuable thing they owned. To put it in today’s terms, “If anyone would sue you and take your car, let him have your other car, too.” And this go the second mile stuff. As you’ve probably heard, there was a Roman law by which a soldier could grab any Jew and force him to carry his pack for as much as a mile. This isn’t just hard work; it’s hard work for the sake of someone you despise. It’s as if he’s saying, “Volunteer to mow the lawn *and weed the flower beds* of the neighbor who’s always dumping trash in your back yard.”

You have to admit: that’d be different. That’s *not* how the world behaves. How about this one: **5:43-47** (‘*You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*’) Pray for people who hate you and want to hurt you. And this doesn’t just mean pray

that God will teach them a lesson or they'll change and become better people than the scums they currently are. Pray for God to bless them. You see, wishing the best for people who like you, for your friends, that's easy: drug dealers do that. Washington lobbyists do that. Vladimir Putin does that. So we pray for our fellow church members? Whoopie. Can you pray for Putin? That'd be different, wouldn't it?

Let's try another. **5:10-12** (*'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'*). So when people attack us and ridicule us – and, by the way, if we really are different from the world around us, they will – then we're supposed to be joyful? That's different, too. Different . . . and hard. How do we manage it? It has something to do with caring more about God's approval than people's, but that's actually our theme next week. For now, let's remember that Jesus said we were to have a different taste, not that it would be easy.

Taste isn't the only metaphor Jesus uses, though. **5:14-16**. (*'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 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.'*) Our world isn't just bland; it's dark. People stumble their way through their lives, never seeing beyond themselves. In this world, if we live the way Jesus told us to live, the way Jesus himself lived, then we bring light to that darkness. You see, many of those living in this dark realm hate it, and they sense that there is more, that there has to be another way to live, and when they see someone who loves as Jesus loved, forgives as Jesus forgave, and smiles in the face of personal attacks, it's as if someone has lit a candle in the blackness. And you'd be surprised how far even a little light can be seen, and what a difference a tiny candle can make in a dark room. You've heard those stories about the one person in a drive-thru who decides to pay for their coffee, and also the next person's? Sometimes that starts a chain reaction that goes for hours. Why? Because the world is desperately looking for a taste of something different, a glimmer of light, and when we are that different taste, that candle on the stand, we inspire others and we point toward our God.

The problem is that few of us are different. How many Christians live anywhere near those standards? I mentioned this a few weeks ago. Generosity and forgiveness are *not* the first thing people think of when they think of Christians. Turn the other cheek? That's un-American! I read a few years ago about an argument on a Christian online forum about which automatic weapon Jesus would prefer. Someone's lost the plot. Jesus has a word for us on this, too. After telling us to be the salt of the earth he adds [**5:13b** *But if salt has lost its taste, how will its saltiness be restored? It is no longer fit for anything but to be trodden underfoot by men.*] If we don't appear different from the world, don't have a different taste, different appearance, if we don't bring light to the darkness, we are useless disciples, like salt that isn't salty. What's that good for?

Henry David Thoreau said that most people live lives of quiet desperation, and when you look at the recurring patterns of greed, cruelty, injustice, disappointment, and isolation of our world, it's no wonder. And it's always been like this: there's nothing new under the sun. People who see that emptiness should be running to the church of Jesus Christ, begging us to tell them

our secret, what makes us different. Why don't we take revenge, why do we love people who hate us, why do we smile when we're attacked? If people aren't running to us, then one of two things has gone wrong: either we're not really any different from anyone else, or else we're not letting others see our difference. Be salt and light. Be different. Be shocking. Be like Jesus.

Prayer:

God, as we return to the emptiness, the bland tastelessness of our daily round,
give us a different flavor.

In a world in which greed and self-serving is predictable,
make us weird.

In a society in which "truth" itself has become a slogan, used by liars and hacks,
make us trustworthy.

In a time when cruelty and indifference to pain is justified as "the price of freedom"
soften our hearts. Make us kind.

Make us different. Amen.