

TEXT: Matthew 5:13-20
THEME: You are the salt of the earth
SUBJECT: Good works
TITLE: Represent

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
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Messiah Moravian
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Ulrich Luz, a retired Swiss theologian, who has written a three volume commentary on Matthew, over 1,700 pages, believes we can no longer determine the original meaning of these sayings about salt, light, and the city on a hill. They can be used for almost any purpose, and the history of interpretation shows that this has actually happened.

Paul Minear, an ivy league divinity school professor who lived to be 101, said he suffered his share of distortions of biblical texts by preachers, but was never provoked to correct the preacher, except in the case of “You are the salt of the earth . . . light of the world.” He believed the frequent and typical sermonic uses of these images were diametrically opposed to Matthew’s *intention*, and that a protest on the Gospel’s behalf was in order.

While I would like to know the original intent of the biblical authors, and do what I can to discover it, I am not sure it is always possible. The Bible was written in languages foreign to us. Jesus spoke Aramaic yet the New Testament is written in Greek. The Bible arises out of ancient cultures very foreign to us, and as we have seen, even people who spend their whole lives learning these languages, studying these cultures, reading ancient manuscripts, do not agree on what they mean.

That does not mean, however, that we are free to make the text say anything we want to avoid its challenge, all the while pretending to be faithful to the gospel. Lets be honest, the temptation to do this is strong and we often yield.

I agree with Sarah Coakley, a distinguished theologian who teaches at Cambridge University, that to think the text can only mean what it meant originally is to fall prey to the genetic fallacy. Just as Paul says only the Spirit knows the depths of our souls and the depths of God and makes these depths known, so this same Spirit still speaks through the depths of scripture revealing more than its original authors knew or even understood.

So. What was Matthew’s intent, according to Minear? The Greek manuscripts do not have paragraph divisions and verse numbers like our English translations. The images of salt and light are connected to the verse immediately preceding: Blessed are you when you are persecuted in the pursuit of righteousness/justice.

Minear believes Matthew is saying disciples who cease to pursue righteousness/justice when faced with resistance/persecution, lose their saltiness, they hide their light under a bushel. They have become worthless and might as well be thrown out and trampled under foot.

A lot of people, according to David Brooks, are looking for God as a sort of tanning lamp. They wander through life and think wouldn’t it be nice to believe in God. They’re looking for a warm glow that’ll shine down on them. This warm glow, call it the heart strangely warmed, call it heart religion, is a hall mark of pietism and of large swaths of American Christianity.

I am not sure Jesus is much interested in tanning lamp theology. The theology of the Sermon on the Mount is not even about Jesus, it is about behavior that glorifies God. Jesus does not say “I am the salt of the earth, the light of the world.” Jesus says *you* are the salt of the earth, *you* are the light of the world. If God is to preserve the earth, if God is to enlighten humanity, it will be through you.

Really? Is this the best God can do? God is depending on us to preserve the earth, to enlighten the world before it plunges into blinding darkness? Now you can understand the appeal of tanning bed theology. Now you can understand why Martin Luther thought the Sermon on the Mount an impossible ideal, its intent to reveal our sinfulness and our need of a savior.

The twentieth century sculptor, Henry Moore, may be closer to Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount than Martin Luther when he said: “The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, every minute of the day for the rest of your life. And the most important thing is, it must be something you cannot possibly do.”

We are in danger of leaving our children and grandchildren an inhospitable if not uninhabitable planet and a world devoid of any meaning or purpose beyond the bottom line. Just as deforestation decreases the capacity of the earth to convert carbon dioxide into oxygen, so failing to bear witness to the wisdom, truth, and beauty of our inheritance to avoid suffering reduces the freedom our souls need to breathe. Our souls can suffocate as surely as our lungs.

When Jesus says “You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world,” he is telling us that we represent God in the world. If the world is to see the glory of God, it will be because we have been faithful witnesses to what is right and true and good, even at the expense of privileges, power, and possessions.

David Brooks spends a lot of time on college campuses, from Liberty University to Yale where he teaches and every kind in between. He says one of the things young people long for is a place where they can go that will offer them a profound sense of peace from distraction, a sanctuary that leads to something deeper.

A large percent of the population beyond the university is looking for a deeper meaning in their lives. The mainline churches are well poised, Brooks believes, to respond to that desire if they can have the courage of their own conviction.

That is, if we have the courage to represent God, to be the salt that preserves the earth from environmental degradation, to be the light that guides seekers to deeper resources of meaning and purpose. So what if this is a mission we cannot possibly complete. It is worth devoting our entire lives to, for in the pursuit lies the fulfillment we long for.