Salty and Bright

A Meditation on Matthew 5: 13 – 20

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church February 9, 2020

I was on the road again this week and spent Friday night with my sister in Nashville. After dinner, we watched a show on HGTV which she has been recording lately. It’s called *Home Town,* and it is set just south west of here, in Laurel, Mississippi. Erin and Ben Napier, the hosts, are more than house flippers. They work with people who want to invest in the beauty of an old house, who want to invest in small town life. They transform the rundown, and often hopeless, into houses full of life and light. The new owner/s don’t see the transformation until the end, after the house has been staged. The welcome mat is at the door, and the flowers are on the table. As we were watching one episode’s big reveal, we both gasped. The camera, showing various shots of the furniture and appliances being put into place, panned across a bookshelf, upon which books were being very intentionally arranged, with their spines to the wall.

The spines were being placed against the back of the bookshelf, the pages facing outward. Did they not want someone to see their enormous set of romance novels? What needed to be hidden? Why in the world would all the spines face the wall? “How,” I shouted at the television, “will you find that book you promised to loan to a friend?” So I “Googled” “books with spines to wall” and discovered that this is an interior design technique, a “hot” if controversial trend. Let us pray that it is short lived. Isn’t that part of the fun of visiting someone: browsing their bookshelves? Commenting on books you’ve wanted to read or that are at the top of your favorites list? Here’s the “genius” behind this idea: books, as you know come in different colors. Their bindings and jackets don’t necessarily coordinate with the palette of the room in which they will be displayed. The wide range of colors can be terribly distracting. Solution? Flip the books around and you have a pleasing wall… of beige. Look online. You can find photographs of floor to ceiling shelves, all the pages facing outward. I pray this trend will be short lived. Did I say that already??

Isn’t it just a bit like hiding your lamp under a basket? Maybe we should turn our art against the wall, too? Especially if it doesn’t match the sofa. Especially if it makes a statement. The only good thing I can find in this concept is the element of surprise. You could go to your shelf and choose a book based on thickness, depending upon how much time you have for reading in the upcoming weeks. There are so many troubling aspects to this trend – and I hope I haven’t offended anyone by saying these things – if this is something you’ve tried; I will be the first to admit that I am not a designer. What bothers me is this: owning books is a privilege, a luxury even. Having shelves on which to place books is a privilege. Being able to read should be a right for all people…but has been treated as a privilege. Illiteracy is a means by which we oppress, and it still too often comes in the form of passing a child on from one grade to the next, ignoring how steadily they are falling behind.

If you wanted to get to know me, you could peruse the books on the shelves of my home or office. Bibles and commentaries, theology, poetry, fiction, children’s literature. Books about being a pastor, about working in the church, about social justice. If I wanted to hide who I am, I could start by turning all those books around, so that a wall of beige pages would stare out into the room. With my books exposed, I am far from a blank slate.

Jesus looked at the disciples and said,

“Don’t hide yourself away. You *are* salt. You *are* light.”

Two Sundays ago, we heard a dramatic reading in which we were urged to think of ourselves as nets. We remembered how Jesus called fishermen to leave their nets behind and *become* nets. *Be the ones* who gather in those who are seeking after God. *Be the ones* who welcome in all those who long for a community in which they can experience God. Last Sunday, we heard Jesus’ words from the Beatitudes, and we clung to the question of whether- or how- or if -we hunger and thirst for righteousness. It was an unsettling question for the disciples then, and it is an equally unsettling question for us today. Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness, or do I hope someone else will do if for me?

We call the Beatitudes “blessings,” but they are very difficult to enflesh. No one sets out to be “poor in Spirit.” Have you tried being a peacemaker lately? If you are a parent, I know you can say “yes,” to that one. It is endless. Have you been harassed for speaking out against God’s vision for the world? Living a “beatitude life” is complicated and painful. Jesus follows those words of challenge with words of encouragement and affirmation: you *are* salt; you *are* light.

In my mother’s last years, I remember taking her to a doctor’s appointment and hearing the doctor say, “I rarely tell anyone this, but you must add more salt to your diet.” She had become so hyper vigilant about her salt intake, that her body was suffering. Our bodies need salt, and our body, the church, needs salt. In the human body, salt, in the appropriate dosage, helps maintain fluid balance, supports nerve and muscle activity, aides in digestion, supports cardiovascular function, aids growth, and possibly even helps with depression. Quite a resume for such a simple little mineral. And it think each of those functions easily relates to our church as well!

Strengthening our spiritual muscles, digesting the Word, enabling our church’s heart to beat with intensity and vitality, helping us to grow, easing our sorrow…

When it comes to food, we really notice when salt is missing. We notice its absence. French fries without salt? Popcorn without salt? They just aren’t the same. Food needs salt. The faith community needs salt. It needs that enhancement that salt brings. We need that saltiness that prevents us from becoming a bland message, that prevents us from turning Jesus’ invitation to radical discipleship into something boring and dull.

You can have too much salt, though. My mother hated slugs. Couldn’t stand the things. They ate the beautiful plants that she tended so carefully. Woe to the slug that met my mother bearing down upon it with the dark blue container of Morton’s salt. She also used my dad’s beer, which evidently has the same effect, but with less pain. For the slug anyway. It didn’t make my father happy. Animals, humans, even the church can have too much salt.

And light can sometimes be too harsh, too bright. Too much light forces our eyes to shut, causes us to turn our heads away.

So how do we find the balance? What is the right amount of salt? How much light is needed? How much boldness is the right amount? How do we know when to speak up, when to speak out? The prophet Isaiah reminded the people that they would never know how to shine, not even be able to shine unless they practiced their faith in their daily living. He cautioned them that practices such as fasting are only meaningful if they expand our understanding of fasting. It must be more than a fast from food and drink. Bodily fasting can be spiritually cleansing, but only if it is linked with fasting from injustice, fasting from privilege, fasting from greed…fasting from any and all lifestyle practices that deprive others of life.

Isaiah says fast by sharing your food. Fast by opening your home. Fast for others, not just for yourself. “Then,” Isaiah says, “then your light will break out like the dawn.”. The next line is a bit surprising: Isaiah adds, “and you will be healed quickly.” They didn’t seem to know they needed healing, but this kind of fasting does exactly that.

Artist theologian Jan Richardson reflects on all this saltiness and light:

*Epiphany…is a season that beckons us to ponder what it is that God desires to manifest through us, and to wrestle with what hinders this. There is much, both within us and without, that works against savoring and shining. Recognizing and resisting the bushels that threaten the light is a practice and a journey all its own. It can be terrifying, these days, to see the ease with which so many of us accept the dimming, allow the bushels that diminish our light as we give over discernment and freedom in exchange for seeming security.*

*Jesus’ words this week are meant to wake us, to remind us of what we carry in our bones: the living presence of the God who bids us be salt in this world in all our savory particularity; to be light in the way that only we can blaze.*

*So how savory are you these days? How is light finding its way into you and through you? Is there anything—or anyone—that is working against this, that is tipping a bushel over your shining? Might there be some part of you that needs revealing, needs to unhide itself in this Epiphany season?*

With Jan, I urge you to explore these questions. Returning to the backwards books on the shelves, I wonder if you have felt the figurative books of your life to be turned with their spines against the wall. The world would prefer all that beigey-ness. It’s calming. It’s soothing. Not disruptive. But that’s not what we are called to be.

Together, in community, we can help one another find the boldness, the saltiness, the right amount of light. And when we err, I pray it will be with too much boldness, May God guard us from becoming bland and tasteless. May God guard us from dimming the Spirit’s light in us when the world continues to stumble in darkness. May we ever seek to be salty and bright.

Thanks be to God. Amen.