

Epiphany 5A 2017 Sermon

February 5, 2017

Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus said, "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. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 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.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

"You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world."

Ever wonder why Jesus used so many images, metaphors, stories? "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed; it is like a pearl of great price; like treasure hidden in a field; like a net thrown into the sea." So often did Jesus use images and parables that the Gospels say, "he did not speak to [the people] except in parables."¹ Why did he do this? Why didn't he just lay out the facts for them, plain and simple?

A team of neuroscientists at Princeton helped answer that question.² They did some experiments several years ago using a machine called a functional MRI, which can scan a person's brain while the person is thinking, and tell which areas of the brain are active. They found that if someone was shown a boring PowerPoint presentation with cold facts and bullet points, those areas of the brain that had to do with language processing lit up, but nothing more. But then they had a woman tell a story, scanning her brain *while* she told the story. Very different areas of the brain were involved: the area involved with emotions, for instance. The scientists then had volunteer students listen to the recorded story that the woman had told, and they found that the brains of the story-teller and the story-listeners **synchronized**: When the story-teller had activity in her insula, a region of the brain linked to emotion, the same region of the listeners' brains lit up. When her frontal cortex lit up, so did that of the listeners. The researcher concludes, "By simply telling a story, the woman could plant ideas, thoughts and emotions into the listeners' brains." Such is the power of stories and images.

The great psychiatrist Carl Jung said that our souls are not transformed by mental concepts, but rather by story, myth, and image.³ Long before Jung and modern

neuroscientists, Jesus knew the power of stories and images to transform our minds and hearts.

“You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.”

Now it seems that in our subconscious minds we are always telling ourselves stories, and often the stories are about ourselves. Bestselling author Patrick Rothfuss puts it this way: “It’s like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story *makes* you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.”⁴ The Director of the Academy Award-winning film *Elizabeth* gave a TED talk on this very subject, titled, “We **are** the stories we tell ourselves.”⁵

The great British theologian, author and missionary Lesslie Newbigin wrote: “...the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ can only be given if we ask ‘What is my story?’”⁶

If we **are** the stories we tell ourselves, and if listening to other people tell stories strongly affects our brains, then it would seem to follow that we are strongly affected by the stories that other people tell about us – whether positive stories or negative stories. And if the person telling the story about us is a key person in our life, like a parent or a spouse, the stories they tell about who we are can have significant influence on the stories our own minds tell us about who we are, because, as both Jesus and Carl Jung knew, stories and images transform our minds and hearts.

So here’s the question: What story about yourself are you telling inside your own head? How did it get there? And is it true to the story **God** tells about you?

I had a phone call a few days ago from a woman I have worked with on and off for a couple of years. Let’s call her “Jane” (though that’s not her real name.) Jane’s first husband was physically and emotionally abusive, and she left him when their son was a baby; that son never knew his biological dad. Last Spring the son, who was by then 17 years old, got news that his biological father had suddenly died; and that death hit the son really hard, for he had always thought that one day he would meet his biological father, and now that could never happen. The son went into a deep depression just a month before graduating Canon City High School. As a result, he didn’t graduate.

Then a few months ago, Jane’s *second* husband – who was disabled, and receiving disability payments, and was verbally abusive to Jane – that second husband *left* Jane and her son and moved out of town. Jane and her son now live with friends. The son, without a high school diploma or GED, works part-time at a local restaurant, not making a whole lot of money. When he turned 18, Jane lost the income she was getting through SSI. Jane is 50 years old. Her psychiatrist tells her she suffers from clinical depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. She

has tried holding a job, but her emotional state makes it impossible. Her parents are alive, so why doesn't she stay with them? Because they are homeless.

I have been asking myself: "What story about herself is being told, over and over, in Jane's head?" If her parents, at age 70-something, are homeless, I can guess that she didn't have, as a child in the important stages of development, the critical example or teaching of how one can be even marginally successful in this world. It's quite likely that the only stories about herself she has ever heard in her life boil down to, "You can't make it in this world." When you're a child and your **parents** can't make it on their own in the world, what would *ever* make you believe that **you** could? If your abusive husbands hit you and tell you, over and over, that you are worthless, that becomes the story that gets imprinted in your brain, until after a while it's the only story you know about yourself.

My friends, quite often I run across people like Jane, whose brains are filled with negative, damaging, dispiriting stories about themselves, stories that say, "I'm stupid." "I'm hopeless." "I'm not capable of making it in this life." And most often, these stories got into their heads because they were the stories they were told by their parents or their spouses, those closest to them, people with whom they were the most vulnerable.

So I have to ask myself: What would happen if Jane heard – and believed – the story Jesus told in last week's Gospel: "Blessed are the poor in spirit;" or as Jesus puts it in Luke's version, "Blessed are you who are poor." What if Jane could come to believe that she is blessed by God? What would happen if Jane heard the story that Jesus tells in *today's* Gospel: "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world!" Could she believe it? That **she** is the salt of the earth, **she** is the light of the world?"

For that matter, do you and I believe it of *ourselves*? Is that the story that we tell about ourselves in our own brains? "I am the salt of the earth. I am the light of the world.?" And if that is NOT the story we tell about ourselves, why not?

Professor David Lose suggests that perhaps the reason that these are **not** the stories we tell about ourselves in our minds, that these are **not** the images we hold concerning ourselves, is that in our society, we tend to hear Jesus' words as commands: "You *should* be salt of the earth. You *should* be the light of the world." It's something we should be able to achieve! But in the Biblical Greek language verbs can come in command forms or indicative forms; and Jesus' words in this instance are NOT commands; they are statements of fact. Not "you *should* be the salt of the earth and the light of the world," but rather, "you **are** the salt of the earth; you **are** the light of the world."⁷

You, I, and Jane **are** the salt of the earth. You, I, and Jane **are** the light of the world. Jesus said so. Why do we not believe it, and live it – let our light shine into the darkness of our world?

One of the reasons we struggle with this, I think, is that we have come to believe that our identity derives solely from what we make of ourselves: The things we accomplish, our successes (or our failures), the virtuous character we have built by sheer moral willpower. It's the very image of the American Dream. And we have come to believe that our identity also derives from the stories *other* people **tell** us about who we are – stories which, as in Jane's case, may be cruel and untrue. In short, we get our identity from what **we** have accomplished (or not accomplished) and from the stories other people tell about us. We do **not** get our identity from the stories *God* tells about us.

Stanley Hauerwas, one of the world's leading scholars in the field of theological ethics, wrote: "Christian ethics does not begin by emphasizing rules or principles, but by calling our attention to a narrative that tells of God's dealing with creation."⁸

I would argue that it is not just our *ethics* that we get from the story of God's dealing with creation; our very identities can be discerned and strengthened when we allow our small stories to be engulfed in the much larger story that God tells us about who we are in and through Jesus the Christ: a story that is far more true, real, and holy.

"A great story," writes Richard Rohr, "pulls you inside of a universal story, and it lodges in the unconscious where it is 'not subject to the brutalities of your intellect or will,' as Thomas Merton might say. From that hidden place you are 'healed.'"⁹ We are healed inside the universal story of God's love and grace.

My friends, that's a primary reason that we gather together in Eucharist every week: to be pulled once again inside that universal, epic story of God's creation and restoration of the world – the story told and enacted in our liturgy.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Can we be transformed, and live by, **that** story, God's universal story of love and grace, rather than live by the small stories of our accomplishments and the stories others tell about us? For if we truly are the salt of the world, we are **God's** salt. If we truly are the light of the world, we are **Christ's** light, and this world desperately needs that salt and light; the world desperately needs us to be who we are.

Go forth and **be** who Jesus says you are! Go forth and shine with the light of Christ.

AMEN

¹ Mark 4:34; Matthew 13:34

- 2 See the following articles about the Princeton study:
Psychology Today, “Why Sharing Stories Brings People Together,” Posted Jun 06, 2011 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/you-illuminated/201106/why-sharing-stories-brings-people-together>
 “The Science of Storytelling: Why Telling a Story is the Most Powerful Way to Activate Our Brains” <http://lifehacker.com/5965703/the-science-of-storytelling-why-telling-a-story-is-the-most-powerful-way-to-activate-our-brains>
 “Your Brain on Fiction” By ANNIE MURPHY PAUL, MARCH 17, 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html?adxnml=1&pagewanted=all&adxnmlx=1354716276-vBCJNxgtIuIFGnU+PmkBpA&r=0>

Note: “Science Mike” mentions that neuroscientists have observed that people who contemplate a loving God see changes in their brains, building their prefrontal cortex (the part of your brain responsible for things like compassion and moral reflection) and lessening the influence of their amygdala (the part of your brain responsible for impulsive fear-based reactions). See http://www.therebelgod.com/2017/02/evangelicalisms-two-faced-god.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook

- ³ “You Need a Big Story Line,” online meditation by Richard Rohr, Thursday, October 8, 2015 <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--You-Need-a-Big-Story-Line.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=mtIxhj6MC24>
- ⁴ Patrick Rothfuss, *The Name of the Wind*
<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/20603-it-s-like-everyone-tells-a-story-about-themselves-inside-their>
- ⁵ Shekhar Kapur
http://www.ted.com/talks/shekhar_kapur_we_are_the_stories_we_tell_ourselves
- ⁶ <http://www.nathancolquhoun.com/2012/09/10/a-sermon-on-our-gatherings-and-what-they-mean>
- ⁷ David Lose, “...in the meantime” blog
<http://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-5-a-promises-not-commands/>
- ⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, p. 24-25
- ⁹ “You Need a Big Story Line,” online meditation by Richard Rohr, Thursday, October 8, 2015. Note also that in the Biblical Greek, the word “healed” and the word “saved” are often the same word, *sozo*. (see various translations of Matt. 9:22, Mark 10:52, etc.) So one could say that we are healed and saved within the universal story of God. <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--You-Need-a-Big-Story-Line.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=mtIxhj6MC24>