

A Salty Presence

sermon digest

July 29, 2012

Matthew 5:13-20

carolyn dipboye

I don't know about you, but over the last decade or so I have found myself and the sort of theology and church I represent in an increasingly uncomfortable position. On the one side are the voices of the religious right, celebrating success in the religion business and pointing to their growing numbers and the sizable sway they hold in the political arena as ready evidence. On the other side and often, I would say, in reaction to the growing dominance of the religious right are the voices of a hostile new atheism that seeks to paint all religious people with the same brush as it anticipates with glee the day when society will outgrow such foolishness and put religion safely in a dark corner, out of sight and out of mind. Rejected on both fronts, liberal or progressive Christianity seems to be in an increasingly untenable position.

I've been pleased in recent days to encounter a smattering of voices suggesting that the death knell for progressive Christianity is premature. In contrast to the funeral dirge that accompanies any mention—when, indeed, there *is* any mention—of mainline Protestantism, voices like that of author and University of California/Berkeley professor David Hollinger speak of the importance of what he calls “ecumenical Protestantism” to the future as well as the past. As a significant historian of American intellectual tradition and as one who speaks specifically from a secular rather than religious perspective, he criticizes what he sees as a gap in contemporary scholarship. Failing to take notice of the significant involvement and contributions of ecumenical Protestantism, the assessment of 20th century American religion, he charges, is little more than “the history of fundamentalism and evangelicalism” [*Christian Century*, July 11, 2012].

If ecumenical or progressive Protestantism is undervalued in scholarly circles, it may be attributable at least in part to the fact that those of us in ecumenical or progressive churches have failed to appreciate our own contributions. “Ecumenical leaders . . . took a series of risks, asking their constituency to follow them in antiracist, anti-imperialist, feminist and multicultural directions,” Hollinger notes [p. 26]; and in the process, they helped change a nation. Failing to appreciate how much our efforts have achieved and how much we still have to offer and intimidated by the numbers, far too many congregations feel pressed to consign themselves to the fringes of society.

Is that the way it is with Grace Covenant Church? Given our size, our age and our budget, do we find ourselves intimidated in the numbers game? Or is there something in our own sense of identity, something basic to our core that bids us still into a bold sense of purpose—a bold sense, if you will, of mission?

The church lives by its sense of mission or it dies. In the sequence of teachings Matthew incorporates into the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has just finished the Beatitudes; and although we usually separate the words that come next from the Beatitudes, Fred Craddock makes an intriguing suggestion. Rather than compartmentalizing those words as if they are of a different order, we should, he suggests, read them as counsel to the specific individuals addressed in the last Beatitude: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (5:11). All eight of the preceding Beatitudes are expressed in the third person: “Blessed are the poor. . . . Blessed are those who mourn. . . . Blessed are the meek. . . . Blessed are those who hunger.” The final Beatitude, however, takes a subtle but significant turn: “Blessed are *you* when people revile you and persecute you . . . on my account” and then follows up with dual affirmations of the “you” just addressed: “*You* are the salt of the earth. . . . *You* are the light of the world.”

Notice that Jesus says “You are” not “You ought to be or should try to be.” And notice as well that he doesn't go into a great deal of explanation about just what it means to be salt and light, although the possibilities are endless. Having acknowledged the crucial importance of those who in his own day are encountering sustained opposition specifically because of their faith in Christ, Matthew through Jesus' words seeks to issue some caution about what can happen in the face of such opposition. “You are the salt of the earth,” Matthew affirms, but be aware that salt can lose its integrity, its saltiness. It may not happen all at once, but over time as the day-to-day strain of the opposition drains the salt of its distinctive taste, its healing properties, its zest for life. After a while it fades into inconsequential oblivion. Having nothing new to add, no contribution it can make to preserve or spice up life around it, it is good for nothing but to be thrown into the trash heap.

Be aware, too, Jesus seems to be saying, that sustained opposition can stampede you into assuming a perpetually defensive posture. Building a city on a hill, for example, may well constitute a sound strategy for self-defense, but be aware that the increased visibility will attract even more hostility. Or better yet, be aware

that trying to preserve your light by withdrawing it and putting it under a bushel for safe keeping may well keep it from being blown out by the winds of change or contention. The price for such a strategy, however, is high. It entails life lived without the benefit of the light, life lived in darkness.

“The way of Christ,” Craddock contends, “is mission: witnessing and benevolent intrusion into the life of the world.”

There is no way that Christ’s cause can be converted into an individual or community lifestyle of self-interest, self-protection and defense against vulnerability. To do so is not to interpret Christ differently, but to abandon him [p. 98].

The church’s mission resides in the world. Jesus’ affirmation of his followers as salt and light point beyond his followers to the world. Rather than withdrawing and licking its wounds, rather than hiding from the world, the way of Christ is the way of taking initiative. It is benevolent, hopeful intrusion into the world in service to the God of healing and light. “You are,” Jesus says, “the salt *of the earth*.” “You are the light *of the world*.” Or as Douglas Hare puts it, “You are salt, yes, but for the earth, not for yourselves. You are light, but for the whole world, not for a closed fellowship” [Matthew, 44]. The imagery here is not just of a thousand points of light each burning brightly in its own little corner. “You [plural] are the light [singular] of the world.” Not just the task of individual Christians, the task is also the church’s task, the church’s corporate mission, the church’s purpose and function, the church’s reason to be.

It is a task defined in covenant. In Exodus, Moses was instructed to use salt in the preparation of incense before “the covenant in the tent of meeting.” In Leviticus, the priests were instructed to incorporate “the salt of your covenant with your God” in their grain offerings.” In Numbers, salt sealed the covenant bond between Aaron and the succession of priests who would follow him. In 2 Chronicles, the bond of a salt covenant joined the succession of kings through David. God initiated the covenants of salt; and they were intrinsic to everything in life that mattered.

In 2004, Grace Covenant Church initiated a covenant: “Believing that we have been called of God to gather this community of grace, we are members of this body of Christ by the bond of covenant—our solemn commitment to God and to one another.” And we went on to define the aspects of our faith that we believe matter most—the God beyond the limits of our understanding; the God we strongly affirm as being in Christ although also as being beyond the experience and faith of Christians; the God who loves all people—especially those living on the margin of despair; the God of welcoming inclusion of all people; the God whose costly grace calls us to the costly life of Christian discipleship; the God of peace and justice who commissions us to become “a voice for those who have no voice;” the God who calls us to be an ecumenical church, joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will; the God who calls us to cast our vision to the ends of the earth.

Given the size, the age, the budget of Grace Covenant Church, we may well find ourselves intimidated if we seek to measure who we are by the numbers game. Given the vision, however, that we have mapped out for ourselves as a congregation, I would suggest to you that it matters incredibly that we exist and that we seek every day to live according to the vision that called us into being. When we measure ourselves by the things that matter most—by the immensity of our calling, the critical importance of who we have committed ourselves to be, the openness, welcome and acceptance of others in a time that is less than open, welcoming and accepting—when we measure ourselves and our importance by these things, by these commitments, Grace Covenant Church and what we are to one another and what we are to the world in which we live override any doubt we might have.

In 2004, as we were organizing ourselves for the future, I came across another new congregation. Then named North Raleigh United Church of Christ and now known as Ulmstead Park United Church of Christ, it expressed something of its mission, its foundational purpose in a poem. The words of the poem were so much in sync with who we had purposed ourselves to be that I sought permission to adapt the poem for use on our website and in our publications. It reads:

If you understand
that faith involves the mind
as well as the heart,
and that taking the Bible seriously
means it cannot always be taken literally...

If you believe
that contrary to the countless ways
society finds to discriminate, God's love
embraces all persons equally...

If for you,
diversity, tolerance, and inclusivity
are signs of strength,
not weakness...

If you are convinced
that faithfulness to Christ
calls us to global citizenship
and concern for the world in which we live...

If you are searching
for a place of belonging
that will nurture your spirit
and challenge you
toward growth and service,

Then you may be interested
in learning more about
the community of faith known as
Grace Covenant Church of Oak Ridge.

Those words represent to me the salty presence of a church that seeks to be in the world as light. I am grateful for that commitment, and I am ready to give myself to seeing that commitment take practical and human form in the world that God loves. Thanks be to God!