

“Be a Beatitude”

Have you ever used a word or a phrase and thought you knew exactly what that word or phrase meant, only to one day find that it meant something more than you realized or something completely different? That is what I have been doing this week.

I have always taken the phrase “salt of the earth” to refer to a person who was humble, reliable, and of good character. It also meant someone without any ostentation. I derived my definition from how I hear the word used and the people associated with the description. The dictionary contradicts me somewhat by defining a “salt of the earth” person as someone who is excellent, of great worth and reliability. They take their meaning from the designation of someone being seated “above the salt” or “below the salt.” Those phrases are derived from the medieval practice many centuries after Jesus. They also cite the association of someone being worth his or her salt. Again a phrase that long postdates Jesus.

What does seem to be consistent between these examples and Jesus’ time is the value of salt. Up until recently salt was a pricy condiment that could only be afforded by the wealthy hence being seated about or below the salt and being worth your salt. Salt today is a very cheap commodity, about one dollar for a canister in the grocery store. That is unless you get into the exotic salts such as Himalayan pink salt, French Grey salt, Black Lava salt, Red Alaca Salt, Pacific Blue Flake, etc. which can be quite expensive.

But the one aspect of salt that the dictionary and I both ignored when thinking about the meaning of “salt of the earth” is the actual use of salt. It finally hit home when I read the first use of the phrase in English outside of the Bible. In Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Summoner’s Tale,” one of the *Canterbury Tales*, he writes “Ye been the salt of the erthe and the savour.” It was that last word that was my “Aha” moment and also my “Duh” moment.

Of course, salt is something that we use to season our food and make it savory. If someone is “the salt of the earth” that person is one who makes the world, not the soil, a better or most tasty place. That person gives life more meaning and relish. When Jesus tells his disciples and other listeners that they are the salt of the earth he is telling them that they are the ones who make life worthwhile. That may not be news to you, but it was to me.

What’s more it makes more sense paired as it is with the next key phrase “you are the light of the world.” You enlighten those around you and you make life worthwhile. I don’t think anyone could give a higher compliment than this. Certainly when coming from Jesus it is high praise indeed.

What clarifies both of these phrases is what comes just before them in Matthew’s Gospel. This passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount, and the preceding passage is what we call “The Beatitudes.” Read or heard in that context these, while not blessings per se, could certainly be counted as blessings.

But just as we need to know what precedes this passage we need to attend to what comes after. In this case it is Jesus saying that he has not come to abolish the Hebrew Scriptures but to fulfill them. Jesus says that The Torah and the Prophets, two of the three sections of the Jewish Bible or Old Testament, still are critically important. Indeed, not a “jot or tittle” will change because of his teaching. But our

righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

If I had been present on the mount listening to this passage I might have been feeling pretty good up until that last bit. I have identified with one of the eight blessings, heard I make life worthwhile, and that I bring light to the world. Then wham, I have to be more righteous than the most righteous people in my culture. At first that may feel impossible for I do not know how to read and write. I do not have the learning of a scribe or Pharisee. I spend most of my time scratching out a living for myself and my family. It is not possible for me to have the time to become as righteous as those people are. All the hope and blessing and promise of the Sermon seems to have gone out of the window, unless I think back to what Jesus said earlier.

When he was offering the Beatitudes and the salt and light sayings he was telling his hearers then and now what real righteousness is. Nowhere did Jesus describe the skills of the Pharisees and scribes. Nowhere did he say, "Blessed are the learned and keepers of the Law." He says to keep the Law and the Prophets, but we are to do so not as a scribe or Pharisee but as one who is salt of the earth, and light to the world. The scribe and the Pharisee argue over the letter of the Law. They tell people the practices that are necessary to be holy. Some of them hold themselves up to be holier than thou because they know all 613 commandments and can tell you the prescribed way in which to keep them.

Jesus says that sort of righteousness is hollow. True righteousness is how we treat each other. A truly righteous person is not an arbiter of God's commandments, but one who helps to make other people's lives more savory like salt. A truly righteous person is less concerned with the literal meaning of the Law and more concerned with enlightening one another as to the spirit of the Law, and how it helps us get closer to God. What's more, if each of us is "Blessed" in some way then we should be treating each other as blessed. Your blessing may be different from mine, but that does not mean one blessing is better than another. All blessings are blessings. There is no such thing as an inferior blessing. Also, there is no such thing as a person who has no blessing. If we think so, or society thinks so, or any person thinks they are not blessed, it is our job as salt and light to point out and to bring out that blessing. If we do not then we are like flavorless salt and light hidden under a basket; for we are holding our blessing selfishly close. There is no good in that.

We are to share our blessing, our salt, and our light promiscuously. Give it away with abandon not because it is worthless, but because it is so valuable we have to share it. To put it another way, what good is a doctor that does not heal? What good is a singer who does not sing or a teacher that does not teach? There is no good in keeping our God given gifts to ourselves?

The Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus tell us over and over again to love one another and to share what we have, whether it is talent, time or treasure. That is what it means to be blessed. You, each and every one of you, are blessed. You may not be aware of your blessing, but it is there. If you don't know what it is then ask someone whose blessing you can see. Let them help you to find your blessing and your saltiness and your light. When you identify get out there and start blessing others with it.

Despite our insecurities, prejudices, blindness, willfulness, ego, and fear, let us bless one another as God has blessed us. It is then that we ourselves become a Beatitude for our neighbor and the world.