

Out of Sync Matthew 5:13-20

It is good to be back from a continuing education conference down in Florida. When I left for the trip, Marla told me that if the weather was particularly good, clear skies, sunny and warm days, she did not want to hear about it. So I want to thank you for the gift of that time away to study and be with colleagues in ministry. The conference was enormously enriching to my faith and knowledge in ways that will benefit my work with you. And did I say, "The weather was great!"

Dr. Warren Carter, one of the speakers from last week's conference, was very helpful in his commentary on our scripture for this morning. Jesus affirms: "You are the salt of the earth" and "You are the light of the world." Hear these words without comprehending the context, and you miss how momentous His words are. Dr. Carter points out that those listening to the Sermon on the Mount would have been the poor and disenfranchised of the world. This is not a difficult calculation to make when eighty percent of the population was poor and struggling to survive. The other twenty percent of the population looked on the masses with disdain, while enjoying lavish lives at their expense. So when Jesus proclaims these words of blessings to His audience, they are a stunning affirmation of those who never receive such blessings. They are also a searing rebuke to the privileged class who would have thought His word absurd. "You are the salt of the earth!" "You are the light of the world."

His words use two of the most powerful images He could have used. Salt was an essential preservative when there was no refrigeration. Salt gave food its flavor. Salt was an essential part of rituals for making covenants in ancient Israel. Light is an image to which everyone can relate. When we think of light, we can think of the feeling of warm light on our face against a cold breeze. Light is the cure for our fear of the darkness and all that lurks there.

Jesus' affirmations also speak to the power which Jesus believes these disempowered people have. Just a small amount of salt transforms the taste of bland food. Just a flicker of light, the light of a candle dispels the darkness that covers a whole room. It is a historic indisputable fact that the force of love and goodness of the Jesus movement in a relatively short time grew from a small group of poor unassuming followers to transform the entire Roman Empire.

So Jesus is empowering people who had never thought of themselves as having much power. He is telling them that they can be a transformative force in the world, when they thought the only power in the world is the power of the top twenty percent.

Jesus is teaching a way of life that is opposition to the ways of an oppressive empire. If we expand our vision of these affirmation to the whole Sermon on the Mount, what we will find is a collection of teaching meant to paint a portrait of what life can be when a community of people live under God's vision of justice or God's reign. Jesus is not giving us a new set of laws meant to be strictly applied in every generation, but a clear set of illustrations of what God is commanding the current generation to do in order to challenge the oppressive ways of Rome. He is doing what rabbis and prophets have done in every generation, reinterpreting the heart of the Old Testament laws to bring freedom and life to the people of God.

This way of life could not be more different from the domination ways of Rome.

- Under the Roman empire people live in scarcity of the necessities of life while a few hoard the wealth. Under God's rule, there is an abundance because people prioritize generosity and the well being of each other.

- Under Roman rule, there is the use of violent force and intimidation to keep people submissive. Under God's reign of peace, there is non-violence and the way of forgiveness
- Under the Roman way, there is wealth and prominence. Under God's justice, there is an inclusion of those who have been excluded and left to fend for themselves.

Ok, enough historical background. We do not want to live as if our faith is about what happened a long time ago. In the United Church of Christ, we believe that God is still speaking to us. This means that our scripture is also a living word for us. We also live in an imperfect society where many of the same challenges people faced in Jesus' day is faced by people now. I say this not wanting to communicate that everything is broken about our American way of life. Just as in Roman times, we have much that can be affirmed. We do well to affirm that we live in a democracy that is far better than what had been before, and we do well to protect that democracy as we work to improve on it. But we also know that many of the injustices and the dominant values of our culture stand in opposition to what it would be like if our world were to be living out God's vision for us. There is a gap between rich and poor, privileged and excluded. Violence and coercion, inconsistencies of justice, and devaluation of human life are still something we are familiar with. We do not always act as a nation with mercy and compassion in our treatment of the misfortunate.

The phrase that has come to mind this week to describe how we are called to live God's vision is "in sync." We all know the importance of being in sync. If I do not make sure that the calendar on my computer is in sync with the calendar on my handheld device, I am going to be in big trouble. If I am not in sync with the family calendar that we have hanging on our kitchen wall, I am going to be in even bigger trouble. I believe Jesus is calling us to be in sync with God and out of sync with many of the dominant commitments and values of the world we live in.

But we like to be in sync with the world around us. We work hard to learn to fit in and to belong in this world, and we teach our children to do the same. It is difficult to be out of sync with the world around us. As Jesus put it this morning, we want to hide our light under a basket. We are far more comfortable fitting in with the world around us, even when that means being indifferent to the darkness. We'd rather play it safe and not be noticed, especially when others might react negatively because we hold different values and attitudes. For instance, there are times when we fear that our church may be too far out of sync with the values of the culture we live in. It is difficult to be true to who we are when others may judge us "different" or "weird." We live much of our early life worried so much about how we fit in and how we can make sure we are included. We don't want to be left out, and we ignore or give less energy to being in sync with God and God's values.

Maybe it is because I am well within the second half of my life that I do not feel the same urgency to fit in. I am beginning to realize how important it is to worry less about what others think and to focus more on what my deeper values are, those that are in sync with God and God's reign. I will offer you an example of this.

As I have shared with some of you, my son Luke and I went to New York City to go see the Harry Potter play, "The Cursed Child." We had a magnificent time together as a father and son touring Central Park, the Statue of Liberty, and eating great Italian and Chinese foods. Luke and I had a Sunday morning to kill before going to see the play that afternoon and evening. We left the apartment and started to walk to find a place to eat. About all we could find was a Dunkin Donuts where we got something to eat. I noticed just down the street a homeless man who was asleep in a pile of blankets used to transport furniture.

As we walked by, my conscience started to prick me. I said to myself, "He's just one of so many homeless people, what can I do to help him? Isn't it better to give my money to an organization that can give him comprehensive help? Besides, this is my time with my son." At that thought, my conscience spoke up to me, this time more loudly. "Yeah, like spending more time with your son cannot include helping a homeless man on the side of the street? It is not like you have not been spending time with him and spending plenty of money on this trip! Can you not afford to help this man just a bit?" Ok, conscience, you win. I bought a gift card at Dunkin Donuts.

We walked back out to that man on the side of the street. He was standing up now organizing his stuff and I said, "All those blankets look like they might actually be warm and even a little more comfortable than you might think you can be out here on the street." He smiled at me with a generous smile, shock, I think, that someone had even stopped to talk with him as a human being. He said, "It's not too bad, especially in this warming trend." I looked him in the eyes as he spoke. I intuitively could sense that this was likely a highly intelligent man, who likely grew up middle-class like me until something in his life took him a different direction. The thought occurred to me, "There but for the grace of God goes me." I said to him, "You look like you could enjoy a good breakfast." His eyes opened wide and there was that nice smile again as I handed him the card. He said to me, "That is just so thoughtful of you. I can make this card last me for a whole week with the coupons I have. Thank you, thank you for being so considerate, and without me even having to ask."

You know the gift of that interaction was not that he thanked me. It wasn't even the gift of a Dunkin Donut cash card. For me, the gift was letting myself get out of sync with living in my own worldly bubble and standing face-to-face with another human being and being human beings together. I am so in sync with the world and not God much of the time that I rob myself and my family of what the greater values and vision of life is when we get in sync with God.

Jesus also said, "If your salt loses its saltiness, it is not good but to be thrown out." Well, how does salt ever stop being salt? A better way of understanding this is to think about what happens when salt gets diluted with a large quantity of something else. When there is just a little bit of salt, and it is corrupted by a much large quantity of something else - it is no longer of any use. That is the way the world works on us. We can be so corrupted by so much else we lose our saltiness.

Tex Sample, a Methodist preacher from Mississippi, tells about the time when he was 15-years-old and a bunch of his friends came up with an idea. They were going to get in a car one Saturday morning, drive down to New Orleans, stay all day and come back that night after midnight. It seemed like a good idea him. It was only a 140 miles to New Orleans.

His daddy told Tex that he couldn't go. "Daddy, uh, I don't know why not...I'm 15-years-old." "Son, you're not going off to New Orleans with a bunch of 15-year-olds and drive back after midnight." "Well, Daddy, everybody else is going to do it." "Son, you need to understand, we are not everybody else, you are a Sample. You are different." Tex thought that was the dumbest, craziest thing he had ever heard in his life. He could not believe it, especially since he did not get to go.

It must not have been a week later and Tex was sitting in the cab stand. His daddy was the owner and operator of the taxi company in the small town they lived in. It was a business of four taxis, held together with chewing gum and a wires.

Tex was working that day when some men came to see his dad. His daddy was running for chief of police. He had never run for political office but for some reason he wanted to. His chances were not at all good.

But these three men came into the stand and said to Tex's dad, "Now A.C., (that was his name,) could you come outside and talk to us? He got up walked around and went right outside the door by the cab stand. Tex could hear everything that was going on. They said to his daddy, "A.C., you know your chances of being chief are not very good, but you know we have lots of influence and we can virtually assure your election. Now here is what we want. You know that any kind of alcohol is illegal in our county, but if we can deliver alcohol to people's homes, we can make a lot of money. And not only can we make sure you are elected chief, we can make it very much worthwhile to you to help us out."

"Well," A.C. said, "that is interesting, but I think I'd have a lot of trouble sleeping with the person I sleep with."

"Now A.C., your wife does not have to know. Helen does not have to know. I mean this can be just between us."

"Well, Helen is important, but I was not thinking about her. I was thinking about me."

He turned them down...COLD and he got beat for chief, badly. But his son, Tex, never can remember again EVER using the argument with his dad, "that everybody is doing it. "

At some point, we do have to decide who we are going to be and what we are going to stand for in this world. "You are the light of the world." "You are the salt of the earth." I think we know who we are. Now we just have to be it.

Amen.