

Salt -- Ben Wayman

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20

‘I’m not religious. I’m spiritual.’ This sneaky tagline is popular among Christians today. There’s a certain attractiveness to it because it appears to blow the whistle on religious busyness and how it misses the point. But the problem with framing friendship with God in this way is this: God doesn’t want religious or spiritual people. God wants disciples.

And I think that’s why Christians use the line. Maybe you’ve used the line. Discipleship is demanding. It requires commitments and sacrifices that we often would rather not make. The preference to ‘be spiritual’ can be a veiled attempt to cast away from God and the church. ‘Being spiritual’ becomes for some Christians a way to sever ourselves from others and their burdens in order to pursue our pet agendas and self-concerns. The problem, of course, is that this kind of living is much too private and self-interested to be anything that God would ever want for us. God’s hope for us is much grander, more communal, and more life-giving than being spiritual can ever offer. God wants disciples - not people obsessed with their private spirituality. What God wants, Jesus tells us, are people who are salt and light.

These metaphors are so common in the Bible that it’s easy for us to lose a hold on what they mean. How do salt and light describe life with God?

This winter I’ve developed a new appreciation for salt. I’ve long been of the opinion that there’s not a food that salt can’t improve. And sure enough, my wife recently introduced me to chocolate salt – which, not surprisingly, is delicious on ice cream. But my new love for salt is of an altogether different kind – for its work on sidewalks, which helps me regain sure footing. This morning Jesus invites us to imagine how being salt helps the world regain its footing with God. Or as we’ll see in a moment, how being salt helps the world recover its taste for God.

John Chrysostom is probably the greatest preacher in the early church. He lived at the turn of the 4th century, and in a sermon about today’s passage in Matthew, he says this:

“It is as a matter of absolute necessity that [Jesus] commands all this. Why must you be salt? Jesus says in effect,

‘You are accountable not only for your own life but also for that of the entire world. I am sending you not to one or two cities, nor to ten or twenty, nor even to one nation, as I sent the prophets. Rather, I am sending you to the entire earth, across the seas, to the whole world, to a world fallen into an evil state.’

For by saying, ‘You are the salt of the earth,’ Jesus signifies that all human nature itself has ‘lost its taste,’ having become rotten through sin. For this reason, you see, he requires from his disciples those character traits that are most necessary and useful for the benefit of all.” (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 15.6)

What Chrysostom helps us see is that by being salt, Christians help a damaged world recover its taste for God. God wants us to renew the world’s desire for God.

When we draw the religious/spiritual distinction, our disengagement with others is more about our lost desire for God than our pursuit of friendship with him. The feigned preference for spirituality rather than discipleship isn't just a Christian problem. It's a *human* problem. Chrysostom is exactly right – human nature has “lost its taste” having become rotten through sin.’ Our rottenness has everything to do with losing our desire for God and replacing it with selfish desires.

This was exactly the problem for the Israelites who had returned from exile in Babylon. They had lost their taste for God, and so had become as bland as the world. They had become a people who used fasting and Sabbath to further their own interests and concerns, rather than refresh their desire for God. And God, through the prophet, calls this rebellion (v.1). *Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.*

What?

How can being religiously spiritual be rebellion? The Israelites complain to God (v.3): *Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves but you do not notice?* Through the prophet, God exposes their false fast as manipulative and self-seeking. *Look, God says, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and fight and strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high (vv.3-4).*

The Israelites' ritualistic, self-interested spirituality is not what God wants for his people. This spirituality is utterly unconcerned with God and his restoring purpose for the world. The prophet makes clear that the kind of fast God wants is one that undoes the bonds of injustice, sets free the oppressed, breaks yokes, shares bread, houses the homeless, clothes the naked, and attends to others' needs (vv.6-7). God wants us to share his desire for the world. And when we share God's desire for the world we begin to forget about ourselves.

But Sin makes forgetting about ourselves difficult. This is exactly why God has given us the gifts of fasting and Sabbath. When we keep God's fast, we open our busy and self-involved lives to being disrupted by God. This disruption is our salvation. When we keep God's Sabbath, God breaks the bonds that oppress our world and us. And when we do this, we are salt and light in a stale and dark world.

So one way of putting the gospel is that it's all about God's desire for the world to regain its taste. The prophet tells us that when we participate in God's saving work by celebrating a true fast, we become a community of healers (v. 8); we become repairers of the broken relationship between the world and God (v.12a); and we become 'restorers of the streets' in our own communities (v.12b). When we do this, the prophet tells us, *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.*

We may fear that by forgetting ourselves we will neglect ourselves. But what Paul helps us see this morning is that this is flawed thinking. Paul points out that there are two kinds

of wisdom. The first kind Paul calls human wisdom, and it's the stuff that drives our fear and desire for self-preservation and promotion. The second kind of wisdom Paul calls God's wisdom and it's counterintuitive because its concern is not ourselves at all, but God. Paul calls it a mystery because it's hard to imagine a universe in which a crucified God is at the center, and not us. Human wisdom has become rotten, and so Paul tells us to beware of it. With human wisdom, he reminds us, the rulers of this age killed the Lord of glory.

Today the Lord of glory tells us, *You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.* You are accountable not for your own lives, but for the whole world. You are called to live your lives in such a way that others will give glory to God (v.16). And the law is no obstacle for living lives that glorify God (vv.17-20). In fact, in what follows in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will *tighten* the expectations of the law and prophets – *You have heard it said...but I say to you.*

We worship the same God as the God worshiped in Hebrew Scripture. And we are prone to the same shortsighted and selfish tricks as the Hebrews, who time and again cast off from the God who called them, rescued them, punished and restored them to be salt and light for the world.

Last week Ginger Coakley spoke about the Set Free Movement in light of Micah 6 – the “social gospel” text, as she called it. Ginger invited us to consider how rescuing modern day slaves is not our religious obligation, but the stuff of our discipleship.

If our discipleship has anything to do with sharing God's desire for the world, Ginger's right. And there's more. Today Isaiah unmasks our manipulative and self-seeking attempts to get God to fall into line with our agendas. And today Jesus invites us to get in on God's rescue plan – to be salt and light in a stale and dark world. Jesus wants us to heal, repair, and restore the world's relationship with the One who made us for nothing less than friendship with God.

Here's the good news. God is not foolish. He's not going to fall for our sneaky fasts and selfish Sabbaths. He's not going to be a pawn in our small-minded scheme to make our lives all about us - to claim spirituality when really, we'd rather not bother with God or his mission in the world. If he didn't fall for it with the Israelites, he's not going to fall for it with us today. The gig is up.

The religious/spiritual distinction is all smokescreen.

God wants your whole life, and God wants it for the *world*.