

Fire and Light: On Radical Discipleship

Peter JB Carman, February 6, 2011, Binkley Baptist Church

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

Question: How can salt lose its savor? This preacher has long struggled with the reading we have heard from Matthew today, because of one little problem: salt doesn't lose its taste. I can't find a single responsible commentator to back up the suspicion that Jesus originally said "Seasoning" rather than salt. But bitter experience teaches us that, unlike salt, herbs and spices do lose their flavor, and when they do, there is little to do but toss them out: put them in the compost heap. We should probably gloss over this issue, because so many ministers and theologians have found meaningful the imagery of being salt—a sign of the covenant between God and Israel, an essential ingredient of life itself. Still there is something lovely about even the remote possibility that once upon a time maybe the saying went something like: "You are the seasoning of the earth. But if pepper loses its power...." At any rate no one can argue with the second half: "You are the light of the world..." Challenging proposals!

Strong salt or fiery pepper, the essential point remains the same! Here right at the beginning of Matthew's account of the teachings of Jesus is the reminder that our faith is not in the end about getting the doctrine and the dogma right. It is about the quality of our lives, the enduring caring unlikely quality of the way we treat our neighbors, the depth of our roots in God, the strong contrast of lives lived without much outward appearance of potency, without much worldly power, and yet lives with the capacity to provide a real powerful flavor—transforming all that is around us. And Jesus challenges his followers to be public in walking in his path: You and I are called to be seasoning and *light*, to light a fire of hope and justice and love in a world sorely in need of these.

The little passage Ray read to us from the Gospel of Matthew is Jesus' invitation to us to go for it, go all the way, when it comes to living out our faith, especially under pressure. This is not about getting all our beliefs right—so often we as Christians divide over minor issues. But the main themes of the Sermon on the Mount are clear. Jesus calls us to be peacemakers. He calls us to radical dependence on God. He calls us to be merciful. He invites us to hunger and thirst for justice, be willing to suffer for the sake of what is right. He challenges us to love not only our friends but our enemies; not to be unfaithful in our hearts to those to whom we have a commitment; to practice nonviolence in the face of an attack; to return good for evil. And it goes on. For much of history much of the church has said this is all too idealistic really to be put into practice. And yet we cannot simply cancel the power of Jesus' call to discipleship. Again and again, over the centuries a few have heeded—grains of salt perhaps, but strong enough to set fire to our hearts.

News from Egypt has been trickling in by email and blog and twitter: My son Luke posted the following from one source [*Guardian*] from Friday. "1.10pm: ... [T]he Catholic cardinal in Egypt reportedly linked hands with a Muslim cleric. Al-Jazeera English now reports that Christians in Alexandria formed a security cordon around the Muslims while they knelt for Friday prayers." Note that it has been but a month since a bomb exploded in Alexandria killing several and wounding many more Christians! Christians in Egypt, officially tolerated by the government and certainly by Muslim teachings, have for a long time had a rough road as minority groups. They have been said to have grown insular: who can blame them? If ever there

was a city for suspicion between religious communities, it is there in Alexandria, Egypt. And yet fire and light, radical discipleship, has a way of emerging, the flavor of faith rooted in an extraordinary promise, an extraordinary love. It has a way of making itself known when it is most needed. Luke finished his post with the simple words: “What Christianity should always look like.”

There is much that is beautiful in the world you and I live in. The great mass of humanity knows what it means to love. We know what it means to create. We know how to be fair. We know how to extend hospitality to a stranger and receive her as a sister. We have the innate capacity to sing! There is music in our very being as humans. And yet we are also capable of great ugliness. We can be consumed by hate, we can cling to power, and we can hurt one another in secret quiet righteous-feeling ways. We even have the capacity not to care a bit.

Jesus of Nazareth understood this strange duality in the human character. And he challenged his followers, his disciples—and this means ordinary people like you and me—not to be overcome by the ugliness, the indifference, the fear. He reminded us to provide a sharp contrasting flavor to that sort of status quo. He challenged us to share what little light we bear, imperfect human candles flickering in the stormy night. He asked us to resist the impulse to keep the light for ourselves. He asked us to go on risking being blown out.

To follow Jesus is a lovely journey! In the depths of God we experience the fire of a Love, a forgiveness, a hope beyond the limits of our imagining. And yet to follow Jesus is also a pilgrimage that tests our characters and invites us to a depth of love and intentionality more profound than we have ever known. And it never stops. It never stops. If we forget the depth of the love we have received from God, the seasoning starts to lose its savor. If we forget to encourage and care for one another on the journey, the fire starts to die down. If we hide our light under a bowl, the night goes on uninterrupted.

What picture comes to your mind when you hear these words? “What Christianity should always look like.”