

“Compassion Made Visible”
February 25, 2024

Amos 5:18-24
Matthew 5:13-20

“You are the salt of the earth.”

I like that.

“You are the light of the world.”

I like that.

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the realm of heaven.”

Well, two out of three isn’t bad.

When we encounter something troubling in scripture, it is often best to linger over it awhile. So, let’s start there—with righteousness and the Pharisees and the realm of heaven.

Amy-Jill Levine reminds us that Matthew’s Gospel accuses the Pharisees of “everything from hypocrisy to plotting the death of Jesus,” so we might think that Jesus is setting the “righteousness bar” pretty low here.

And yet, while Jesus didn’t always agree with the Pharisees, he honored much of their teaching. The first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, said that Pharisees were known for reason. They believed that people enjoy free will to choose whether or not to follow the path of virtue and that people will be judged on their behavior.¹ Pharisees worshipped regularly. They read the scriptures and prayed. They hoped in the resurrection of the dead. They were pillars of the community. They were—as I’ve often said—the Congregationalists of their day.

It helps, I think, to understand that “righteousness” is not about smug satisfaction and judgmentalism that seems to know what is best for others. The great 20th century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, helps us when he says that “Righteousness goes beyond justice. Justice is strict and exact, giving each person his due. Righteousness implies benevolence, kindness, generosity. ...Justice may be legal; righteousness is associated with a burning compassion for the oppressed.”

The word “righteousness,” then, speaks simply of right relationships—between people, between nations. Those actions that make for relationships of benevolence and compassion are “righteous.” Those people who work for such relationships are “righteous.”

We know that there have been times when, as individuals and as a nation, we have not been righteous. We have taken actions that mar or ignore the image of God in others. Our righteousness has not exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees. It often seems that our righteousness doesn’t exceed even that of the Lutherans and Presbyterians. Self-reflection might even lead us to confess that our righteousness is far less than that of people who never darken the doors of a church.

When Jesus starts talking about righteousness, we sense that we stand under judgment. Left to ourselves we might indeed be called least in the realm of heaven that Jesus announces—if we enter it at all.

But we have not been left on our own.

The One who holds out a greater righteousness as our calling also announces and offers the mercy and forgiveness of God. The One who tells us that the law of love is binding for us is also the One who makes it possible to fulfill that law.

Let's be honest: when it comes to righteousness, ultimately all that we have—and all that we can offer to others—is the assurance that God still loves us and still calls us to love others.

It is only with that assurance that we can hear the call to live in the world as salt and light.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus says. *You—all of you*. And if you fail to be that—if *we* fail to be that—what good is there? After all, “If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?”

Salt that had lost its taste was a figure of speech for being foolish. Jesus tells us that those who follow him are truly wise in a foolish and dangerous world.

Truly wise—and our only wisdom is Christ crucified and risen.

In Christ crucified we discover the God who is present in the depths of human suffering. We find God made known to us in weakness, anguish, and despair as much as in strength and confidence.

In this wisdom, we affirm God is making something new even in the midst of great suffering.

In this wisdom, we are not called to straighten out all the problems of the world—which is something to remember in these days.

We are called to be what we are: salt.

to live out of the wisdom that life is both good and possible because it is a gift from God;

to live out of the wisdom that there is no wound so deep in any person or in the world that it cannot be healed by the God who gives life;

to live out of the wisdom that there is nothing you have done—or failed to do—that God cannot forgive.

Without the wisdom of Christ crucified and resurrected—the only wisdom we have—a congregation, like salt that has lost its taste, is no longer good for anything.

We are salt—wise in the world because we know Christ crucified and risen.

We are salt—announcing the healing forgiveness of God.

We are the salt of the earth. Now.

Of course, a world in shadows also needs illumination. So, yes, Jesus, who said of himself: “*I am the light of the world,*” also says to us, “*You are the light of the world.*” Now.

It is the property of light to shine. Like a city on a hill, we are a visible community.

Now, over the years, many have misread and misused Jesus’ words about a city built on a hill to support a sense of American exceptionalism. That, of course, was not the intention when John Winthrop first borrowed that phrase when speaking to 17th century Puritans heading for the New World. But everyone from Kennedy to Reagan to Obama have used it that way.

Jesus—and John Winthrop—were warning the followers of Jesus that that what we do will be seen—and we will be judged accordingly. This is a call to, yes, *public righteousness*.

Invisibility is not an option for the church. We shine in the world, Jesus says, so that our good works might be seen; we shine in the world—so that our good works will lead others to an understanding of the God who forgives and makes life new once more. A world in the shadows of terror and war, greed and poverty, hatred and fear needs the light that we are.

We are the light of the world. Now.

You are the salt of the earth. I like that.

You are the light of the world. I like that.

As salt and light, we continue to be involved in shaping our common life, allocating our resources, and dealing with shared problems so that we can live together with some measure of justice and mercy, that is, with some measure of righteousness. As salt and light, we seek to make compassion visible.

As the salt of the earth, as the light of the world, then, let us return and think a little more about righteousness.

Alexis de Tocqueville thought faith exerted a crucial moderating force in a democracy. He argued that though “the law permits the American people to do everything, religion prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything.”

Maybe. But in our time, we see “religious” people conceiving and daring just about everything. They seek to impose their religious vision on others and to restrict the basic rights of people.

So it is a that the Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court invoked “God” 41 times and quoted widely from the Bible in his concurring opinion supporting the decision that frozen embryos are children.

Here in Iowa were seeing yet another attempt by the Iowa legislature to allow people to use their religious beliefs to deny basic services to anyone they please. This past week the Iowa Senate passed a so-called “Religious Freedom Restoration Act.”

Now, the original, federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act was designed to protect an individual *from the government imposing its will* on an individual’s religious freedom without a compelling reason. It was not intended to place one person’s religious freedom above the rights of another person—which is the danger of the Iowa Bill. It would create religious exemptions that allow people to pick and choose which laws they follow and allow religious beliefs to be a basis for discrimination.

Religion in America doesn’t always do what de Tocqueville thought it would do.

Much of what is happening in these days is not righteous as the prophets and Jesus use that word.

Amos spoke to a people who had strayed so far from God’s ways that they, too, were conceiving and daring everything.

Amos, of course, was not a scold, he was a prophet. His work was not to chastise or criticize, but to call the people to turn in a new direction, to change their minds and their hearts and their actions, to do something different, to be better people.

The religious word for this is “repentance.” It is an offer of new life.

We are called in these days, not to religious *self-righteousness*, but to righteousness. We might not be able to get along with everyone. But we can seek right relationships with our neighbors; we can work to establish social structures that help support strong, independent lives rather than make more broken people.

This is what Amos is getting at with his invitation to “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Justice and righteousness, Amos suggests, are always present in the world as the activity of God. If our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, we will get out of the way and let the justice of God roll down like waters.

Amos was well aware that religion at its worst got in the way of right relationships between people. Worship should lead us to joining with God in what God is already doing in the world: restoring and rebuilding, bringing more life—blessing—for all.

Because our own righteousness is not always greater than that of the scribes and the Pharisees, let us trust God constantly.

We recognize that all our struggles—to love our neighbors, to create peace and justice, to reduce and eliminate hunger—all our struggles are not losing battles because of God’s grace can work in us and through us.

This is the good news:

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

Live like it.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Toward the Kingdom of Heaven*, pg. 18 ff.