

Shining Brightly Matthew 5:11-16. Feb 5th

Imagine if you were applying for a job, searching the internet and the newspaper for vacancies, and you came across this advertisement:

Wanted: Someone who is willing to accept persecution. Must be able to withstand physical abuse, to brush off verbal insults, to ignore slander, and be able to face economic hardship. A willingness to stand out and accept public exposure is a necessary requirement of the job. The applicant must also not advocate for any credit for good performance. A lifelong commitment is required. Excellent benefits.

It probably doesn't sound like the type of job that you might want to apply for, even with the promise of excellent benefits. But that is what Jesus is advertising in Matthew 5:11-16.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples. If we look back a few verses, we read in verse one of chapter 5, that:

Jesus went up the mountainside, sat down, and his disciple came to him
(Matthew 5:1)

He went to get away from the crowds, but more importantly, he went so that he could talk to, and teach his disciples in private. Disciples – this is the first time that Matthew uses that term in his gospel. It is used here not just to suggest a group of 12, but to denote those that have been called to actively follow Jesus; it is to define all those that have a sense of commitment. And if we call ourselves Christians, if we are people of faith, then we too are disciples – so this lesson from Jesus is a lesson for us too.

But what Jesus teaches that day is not easy for anyone to hear. He tells his disciples what is expected of them in their role of discipleship. He gives them a job description – and it is not unlike the one that I read out.

Jesus begins by warning them of persecution. And it is not a warning about how to avoid persecution – no, he is telling them that persecution a requirement of being a disciple. And the word ‘persecute’ would have meant both physical, verbal, and economic ill-treatment because of their association with him. In other words, Jesus was asking them to accept the same treatment that Jesus himself would receive. And he is telling them not to moan about it, or try to avoid it, but to be happy about it. Verse 12 says:

Rejoice and be Glad! (Matthew 5:12)

To be glad about the persecution. Wow that is a pretty- tall order. And I have to admit that when I read it – my mind went immediately to the horrible and violent persecution that we witnessed last Sunday night in Quebec. Ask yourself - if people stormed in here, in our holy, sacred space, and persecuted us with heinous acts of violence - would we rejoice? I doubt it. We would likely be angry, hurt, confused, terrified, and a whole array of other emotions. It’s normal to react that way. And some of us might even want to seek revenge. When you think of it that way, it helps us understand a little how our Muslim brothers and sisters might be feeling.

But this passage that we read today is very clear about how we should respond. When we are persecuted – we are called to rejoice. That’s part of the job description of being a disciple. We are called to be happy because it means that we have been recognized for who we are and for what we believe. Not recognized for all the good things that we might do. No. Recognized for our faith in Jesus.

If you go back in history, there are so many examples of people who have spoken out for their belief in God, and they have faced the consequence of violent reprisals from non-believers. Terrifying statistics show that millions of Christians in our global village are being persecuted around the world for their faith. And as we have seen, it is not just Christians – it is also Muslims, Jews, Hindu's, Seekers, and many other faiths that face persecution because of their believe in their God. Persecution is not new. Jesus tells us in verse 12:

“in the same way, they persecuted the Prophets who went before us”
(Matthew 5:12)

And in the light of that heritage, to be persecuted for the sake of Jesus is to be considered a badge of honor – it is part of the job description of being a disciple.

But the call to accept persecution is followed in our reading by a series of images that explain why it is important that disciples should be both different and seen to be different. Jesus first uses the metaphor of Salt. He calls us to be:

The salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13)

But what does it mean to be Salty in this context? The two most significant uses of salt in the ancient world were for flavoring and preserving food. Either or both of these uses would provide an appropriate sense in this passage. Jesus is telling us, that as disciples, we are to provide flavor to world in which we live, and we are to help to preserve our world and prevent it from corruption. In other words, we are to make the world a better place.

So, what does that mean for us today, in February 2017. Well I think this passage from the lectionary comes to us today with the Spirit of God. Because I think this passage reminds us, that our response to the tragic events around us should be a response of saltiness. We are called to respond with love, compassion, acceptance – and all things that make our world a better place. Because if we don't – if we begin to go down the path of blame, of accusations, of anger or of racist and bigoted beliefs – then, my friends, we have lost our saltiness. And Jesus warns us in verse 13:

Salt that loses its saltiness ... is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out." (Matthew 5:13)

The second metaphor that Jesus talks about in this reading is the metaphor of light. It is a metaphor that we read repeatedly in scripture. Light symbolizes the new hope. Where there is light, people can find their way. But where there is darkness, people trip, stumble and get lost. The imagery of the metaphor is especially strong when Jesus says in the gospel of John that he is "The Light of The World." It's a phrase that we often repeat when we light our Christ Candle – a visual reminder of the importance of light.

And as I reflected on this passage, I was again brought back to the visual image of all the flickering candles that were lit and held in vigils around mosques across the country this last week. As the lights shone out, they were symbols of hope.

And that is what we are called to do as Disciples. That is part of our job description. We are called to be a light where we can be seen. Like the lights in a hilltop town that shine brightly over everything. It is another metaphor that Jesus uses in verse 14 to describe how visible we are called to be. In our modern western individualism, it is easy to think that we can all shine in our own individual corners, hidden in our homes, or in our own churches and communities, – “you in your small corner and I in mine.” But this scripture calls for the collective lights of a whole community. Just like we saw across Canada. Jesus reminds us in this metaphor that the combined impact of many lights that make up a town, are so much stronger than a single light. And so are we – when together we all shine our light as a community of believers . And when we join our lights, and shine brightly with the lights from brothers and sisters of other faiths – then, my friends, then it draws the attention of the watching world.

So, how are we to shine? It is through our actions, our words, our distinctive lifestyles, in everything that we say, do, and think - in every way we must be visible to others so that they can see the Glory of God shining brightly. Verse 16, Jesus tells us:

Let your light shine before everyone, that they may see your good deeds, and praise God in Heaven. (Matthew 15: 16)

Being a disciple is a tough job description. Jesus never promised it would be easy. And we live in a very challenging time. But as you go out into the world, I encourage each of you to shine brightly – don’t hide your light- don’t be afraid- speak up to make the world a better place – and join with others, of all faiths, so that the world may know the power, love, and Glory of God, here on earth. Amen.