

You are Salt and Light!

Meditation on Matthew 5:13-20

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

Feb. 5, 2017

*'You are the salt of the earth; **but** if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, **so** that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; **I** have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Jim was busy emptying bookshelves this week preparing for the installation of new flooring in two rooms of our house. (We had a plumbing issue last summer.) We discovered that we have even more books than we thought we had. Poor Molly could barely get to her water bowl. Jim said we needed to get rid of some of our books. He picked up one of mine and asked, "Why do you need 7 -- no 9 copies!-- of *I am a Muslim?*" I used the book for a study group in my last call--in rural, Renville, MN. The book is a kind of faith memoir written by Asma

Gull Hasan. The young American woman, a Denver lawyer, speaker, and author of a number of books, is the daughter of Muslim, Pakistani parents. She grew up in Pueblo, Colorado, where many of the local population mistook her and her family, including her physician father, for Hispanics because of their brown skin. The book was published in 2004 when the mention of “9/11” stirred horrifying memories of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the airliner crash in Shanksville, PA; nearly 3,000 Americans lost their lives.

Asma, in her introduction, writes, “I have never been ashamed to be a Muslim, not even after 9-11, and not now. I know that many non-Muslims do not understand Islam but want to learn more. I also know that some Muslims carry out violent acts in Islam’s name and use Islam to justify many un-Islamic things. ... I have been Muslim my whole life and I cannot imagine being anything else...The Islam that I practice is not the one depicted by Osama bin Laden or by *Al Jazeera*, cable news, or the fear-mongers. I am not a member of a secret society of terrorists nor do I plot the death of non-Muslims. What Islam is really about is so different from the many misconceptions--about women, about other religions and about even the concept of Jihad. Islam does not preach violent aggression against one’s ‘enemies.’ The *Qur-an* and the core values of American society are ‘strikingly similar...” she says.

Asma, who chooses not wear the hijab, argues that Islam is a “woman’s religion.” The Prophet Muhammad was a feminist, she says; he worked to advance women’s rights. He ended the practice of female infanticide and he encouraged women to participate in politics. He encouraged the tradition of women keeping their maiden names after

marriage. And the Qur-an teaches that women have the right to own property and to seek an education.

I decided to lead the book group because I was concerned about the fear, prejudice and anger nursed by some of my flock in rural Minnesota. They knew very little about Islam. They were suspicious of their nearest Muslim neighbors--the Somali refugees living in Wilmar, a town of about 20,000 people, 25 miles north of Renville, population 1,300. Willmar is the retail, restaurant, banking and medical hub for those living in the surrounding countryside. Rural folks see but don't interact much with Somali-immigrant families when they shop, bank and go to the doctor. And they don't see Somalis in their homes or at school. If they did, they would see children and teens behaving much like American-born children and teens.

I admired the brightly colored clothing the women wore; sometimes the fabric was draped over blue jeans, snow boots or running shoes and worn under winter coats--because it was Minnesota, after all. How difficult it must be for them, I remember thinking as I sat alongside them in doctor's office waiting rooms. They are so far from their former home, in a much colder climate, living amongst a population, many of whom had little understanding of their language or culture, except from what they pick up if they venture into a Somali grocery store or restaurant in Willmar.

Getting to know some Muslim American women while I worked as a journalist in York, PA, I came to admire their commitment to their faith that affects so many aspects of their lives. They can't help but think about their faith every day. They wear the hijab despite the curious or

suspicious looks they receive; they pray 5 times a day; they attend weekly prayer services at the mosque; they fast **30 days** during Ramadan, and they faithfully give to the poor--one of the 5 “pillars” of Islam.

Living out our faith so that the world can see and know our Triune God is the subject of this passage in Matthew 5. This is a *hard* passage; it’s about our witness! What does the world see and hear about us? Does the world see a difference in those claiming to be followers of Christ? We talk about loving God and neighbor, but are we working to make the world a more loving, just and peaceful place? Do our lives give glory to God?

Jesus in Matthew 5:13 tells his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth!” Salt in the ancient world is a prized preservative; without it in a warm climate without refrigeration, food spoils quickly. Salt is a coveted culinary item; it brings out the flavor in foods and makes bland food tastier! Jesus has just told his disciples that they are blessed when they are meek, poor in spirit, merciful, pure in heart, and when they are peacemakers, hunger and thirst for righteousness, and are persecuted for His sake. Now he adds, not only are you blessed when you embrace these qualities of life, *the world will be blessed when you do!!*

But even salt can lose its flavor, Jesus warns. And then it’s worthless.

“You are the light of the world!” Jesus says. “A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” Christianity isn’t some private, secret faith, lived in isolation from the world. “Let your light shine before others,” he goes on, “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Don't hide the light meant to shine in the darkness of the world!! This is how the Lord draws more people to Himself.

What is meant by "good works?" Don't misunderstand! We aren't talking about earning our salvation. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast." We aren't talking about salvation in this passage; we are talking about our witness as Christ's disciples, called to reveal the Kingdom here and now.

Jesus reveals His own good works through his self-giving life, by being obedient to God, seeking the Heavenly Father humbly in prayer, and demonstrating his love and concern through his compassionate ministry to the suffering and otherwise needy--preaching Good News to the poor, casting out demons and healing people of sickness and disease.

The "law" that will never pass away of which he speaks beginning in v.17 goes much deeper than the "shalts" and "shalt nots" of the *Ten Commandments*. In verses 21-24, he shows that he expects more than just the letter of the law like the scribes and Pharisees attempt to do. Jesus expects his disciples to live out a law of God written on our hearts, as Paul says in Romans 2:15. This means, for example, as Jesus teaches in Matthew 5, that you have broken the commandment, "Thou shalt not murder," when you are angry at your brother or sister. If you are angry with someone, first be reconciled with them before returning to the altar to offer your gift to God.

I can't say that my Islam book study really made any difference in attitudes toward Muslims. But as a follower of Christ, *I have to try* and shine light in the darkness of fear, prejudice, and ignorance in this world. For God calls us to love our neighbors as much as ourselves; some of our neighbors happen to be Muslim! By the way-- *I am a Muslim*--is an easy read for teens or adults. And I have 7 or 9 copies to give away!

I would like to close with some happy news about some of our Muslim neighbors in need. I read in the Minneapolis *Star-Tribune* yesterday about a 4-year-old Somali refugee, who had been living in Uganda. She was reunited with her family in the States this week--after more than 3 years apart! Little Mushkaad Abdi's mother, Samira Dahir, and her two older sisters have been living in Minnesota since 2013. Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota agreed in August to sponsor Mushkaad. The little girl was due to arrive at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport Jan. 31--4 days after the executive order that temporarily bans refugees and travelers from 7 predominantly Muslim nations, including Somalia, from entering the United States. Two senators fought for Mushkaad's return. One called the U.S. Homeland Security Secretary. Mushkaad arrived safely at Minneapolis Airport on Thursday, by way of Abu Dhabi and Chicago.

Be salt! Be light! And give all the glory to the Lord!

Let us pray.

Holy One, we lift our hearts to you in thanks and praise for the light of your

Son, Jesus Christ who lives in and among your people. Help us to remember always that your light is with us and will empower us to do the good works you lead us to do. Humble us as we serve you, recalling with joy and gratitude that everything we do is *for you and your glory*. Thank you for your love, mercy and grace and that we have forgiveness of our sins and new life through your Son as a gift from you! Stir us to examine our own hearts and lives so that we may be a more faithful, loving witness for you and your just kingdom. Forgive us for neglecting the needs of our neighbors and for sometimes harboring fears and prejudice against people who adhere to a different religion. Empower us to courageously shine your light in this dark world! Use us to draw more people nearer to you. In Christ we pray. Amen.