



First United Church of Oak Park

Color Outside the Lines

Matthew 5:11-20

The Rev. Dr. Deborah Kapp

January 14, 2018

A week ago Saturday, we held a memorial service here in the sanctuary for Jim McClure, a member of this congregation who died in December at the age of 97. Before he died, Jim requested that we sing two hymns at his service, one of which was *Once to Every Man and Nation*. I was happy to acquiesce to this request, because this hymn is an old favorite of mine. Not only is it set to one of those great Welsh hymn tunes, but it also has a text that evokes for me some of my most formative years. We sang this hymn frequently when I was at seminary in the early 1970s – during the last few years of the Vietnam War and just a few years after Dr. King was killed, so the tumult of the anti-war movement and the reverberations of the civil rights movement were in the air. We sang this hymn with gusto.

Some of you may be looking in the blue and black hymnals to find this hymn, wondering what it says, but you will search in vain, because neither the Presbyterians nor the UCCs include it anymore. It's been left out, probably for at least two reasons. The first is gender: people have become increasingly uncomfortable with singing "Once to every man and nation," and good substitutes are hard to find. Trust me, I've tried. Most substitutions are either awkward or they lack the grand oomph of the original. A second reason this hymn may no longer be in our hymnals is one that my former colleague, Bob Cathey, pointed out to me, which is that is that the text is too full of absolutes, and we no longer live in a world in which we think in absolute terms.

*Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth and falsehood,
For the good or evil side.*

Bob says the world is just too full of grays and multiple narratives for a hymn like that to be sing-able anymore. I think he's got a point, and he said that years before we were talking about things like "truthiness" or "alternative facts." The hymn was written in a different age, says Bob, and, indeed it was. James Russell Lowell wrote it 173 years ago as a protest against the Mexican American War. As a strong abolitionist, Lowell was worried that victory in that war would empower the South and expand the territory of slavery. He wrote this hymn to take a stand against both.

Resistance hymns are interesting, especially good ones, because they can transcend their times, as this one did. Even though *Once to Every Man and Nation* was sung to oppose injustice in the nineteenth century, it morphed to resist war and racism a hundred years later. It is little wonder that the hymn has been put to multiple uses. It calls people to decision, to action, and to courage. It challenges us to take a stand as disciples.

Jesus does something of that same thing in the text that is before us this morning. Jesus begins by saying that people who stand up for him and thus encounter persecution are blessed. He concludes by telling the disciples that their righteousness should exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, which was something of a challenge, because the scribes and Pharisees were sort of the Mike Pences of their day – people who prided themselves on their moral rectitude. In between these statements about persecution, on the one hand, and extraordinary righteousness, on the other, Jesus waxes poetic about discipleship:

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 have probably often heard the phrase “salt of the earth” applied to people of your acquaintance. Usually we use that term to refer to someone who is steady and reliable. In Mick Jagger’s song of that title, he rhymes “salt of the earth” with “humble of birth,” and that’s another way that we often think of people who are referred to by that phrase.¹ Certainly the disciples, to whom Jesus addresses this statement about being the salt of the earth, are hard-working people of humble birth. But Jesus apparently has something more in mind than simply affirming the dignity and decency of his followers.

In the ancient near east, salt was important for a variety of reasons, the least important of which was seasoning or preserving food. Salt played a significant role in daily temple offerings, so it was associated with adoration and prayer. Salt was also used to ratify covenant bonds between people and institutions, so it symbolized unity and commitment.² Finally, on a more mundane level, salt was used to fuel fires because it combined with the everyday fuel source in ways that helped fires to ignite and burn hot; thought of in this last way, salt is a metaphor for firing things up.³

As the disciples listen to Jesus on the mountain that day, when he says, “you are the salt of the earth,” they hear something more than Jesus affirming that they are really good people. They also hear echoes of temple worship and sacrifice, reminders of community commitments, and, perhaps also, an encouragement to heat things up, light a fire, disrupt the status quo.

You are the salt of the earth.

A person like Jim McClure heard that affirmation from Jesus, and he took it to heart. In company with others, he heated things up in Oak Park, working tirelessly to help this community become more open and integrated. His commitments to openness and diversity spilled over into the life of the church, where he championed the presence and leadership of women, people of color, and later LGBTQ persons. He was never content to let things stay the same if it meant that people were being hurt or disenfranchised.

¹ <http://songmeanings.com/songs/view/45247/>

² Paul S. Minear. “The Salt of the Earth.” Interpretation 51:1 (Jan 1997), 31-41.

³ John J. Pilch. “Salt for the earthen oven revisited.” HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies 67:1 (2011), Art. #826, 5 pages. DOI:10.4102/hts.v67/1.826

You are the salt of the earth.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was also such a man. When the opportunity arose for him to make a difference in Montgomery, he rose to the challenge and never wavered. He was often frightened, and he had plenty of doubts, but he never wavered, nor did many of the people who worked alongside him night and day to make a more just society. Some of those names we know: Fanny Lou Hamer, Ralph Abernathy, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, John Lewis, Fred Shuttlesworth.

But the names we know are just the tip of the iceberg. The majority of the people who put their lives on the line for civil rights and a more just society are nameless to us, even though their contributions were enormous. There is a long and noble list of salty Christians who walked to work in Montgomery, and braved police dogs and beatings in Birmingham, and marched to Selma. There is a distinguished roster of salty Christians who offered support in the background of the Civil Rights movement with legal advice, education and training, political strategies, and financial support. They were people who were willing to light a few fires and turn up the heat.

You are the salt of the earth. This is a text that encourages disciples to be provocative – but not provocative just for the fun of it. This text encourages the provocation that results when disciples pursue God’s righteousness, when we act in ways that improve the lives of the least, the last, and the lost.

When we provoke in the pursuit of righteousness, we will often run up against the world’s moral rectitude. In the sections we read this morning from “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King addresses that very problem. Religious leaders are telling him that he’s moving too fast, that he should lower the heat instead of turn it up. In the face of that moral rectitude, Dr. King laments the reluctance of the church to get engaged in social or political issues. We read sections of the letter that indict white churches, but he does not confine his criticism to churches of only one race. The tendency to toe the line and define our religion as the pursuit of a don’t-rock-the-boat morality is a tendency that transcends race. And this tendency is not all bad. We need a society in which people agree that a red light means stop, and a green light means go, and we all behave accordingly. But if behaving accordingly and adhering to all the expectations people place on us is all we ever do, nothing will ever change, and the disenfranchised of the world will be stuck in place.

Several years ago, I was at some church meeting where there was a whole group of adults and youth wearing bright colored tee shirts, which I immediately coveted. On the front of the shirts was a big, empty square. Over the square it looked like someone had taken several crayons—red and blue and yellow and purple—and colored vigorously, so vigorously that the coloring did not stay in the lines of the square. Underneath the picture was the imperative: “Color outside the lines.” On the back of the shirt was a quote from Paul’s letter to the Romans, which we read this morning: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”

You are the salt of the earth.

Jesus is looking for disciples who are willing to color outside the lines when they have a chance to help people whose hearts and lives are broken. Jesus is looking for disciples who are willing to put their imaginations to work for the sake of the kingdom of God. Jesus has found such disciples across the ages, in all sorts of circumstances.

Jesus has, in fact, found such disciples in this very room. Some of you have a very hard time coloring inside the lines. This morning, at least, that is a really good quality to have.

You are the salt of the earth. Keep up the good work. Amen.