

Sermon: The Good that Won't Come Out

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Scriptures: Acts 2:42-47; Matthew 5:13-20

Introduction to Theme:

In Galatians chapter 5, St. Paul describes what it looks like when we are living according to the Spirit instead of the ways of the world. Today, we continue with our “Fruit of the Spirit” series, during which we are discussing each of the virtues Paul lists. As a reminder, there are nine virtues of the Fruit of the Spirit—and I’m going to say these out of order: faithfulness, goodness, self-control, patience, gentleness, joy, peace, kindness, and love. Each week all the way to June 11, we will discuss a different feature we might show when we are living as God’s Spirit desires for us to live. Last week, we talked about faithfulness, calling on us to look to God’s steadfast example as we model faithfulness in our lives and relationships—not just with God, but with others. This week, we’re going to shift to goodness. What does it mean to be good? What does goodness look like? Where does goodness come from? Why should we be good? We’re going to explore all of that and more, but first, we have some scripture to hear.

Sermon:

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, I worked at a store called Circuit City. Working in retail is not an easy job and it certainly doesn’t bring out much goodness in folks, but there are some perks. For one thing, I met so many interesting people that I am friends with to this day. When I started training for operations management at a new store, one of those friends took it upon himself to introduce me to new bands. I’ve got eclectic taste. My favorite of all of those bands I discovered during that time is called Rilo Kiley: many of whose best songs include a bit of political or cultural commentary. I know, I know you’re shocked to hear that I would like a band that gets political!

When I sat down to write a sermon on goodness, the first thing that came to mind was a song called, “The Good that Won’t Come Out.” This song is really about exactly what the title implies: a whole lot of people, who mean well and purport to have good hearts, that just can’t seem to manifest that good in any way that really matters. The song starts:

“Let’s get together and talk about the modern age,
all of our friends are gathered here, with their pets just talking stuff
about how we’re all so upset about the disappearing ground
as we watch it melt.”

The song constantly calls us back to concerns we see, and even understand, but do nothing about. In the case of the lyric I just quoted, we can see sea levels rising and weather changing, but we’re just watching it happen rather than doing a thing to help solve it. Rilo Kiley sings, “Eventually our hands will turn to dust if we keep shaking them standing here on this frozen lake.” Our non-response to real problems in our lives and world might even amount to what some call hypocrisy: complaining or praying about a problem you are unwilling to resolve.

When I listen to this song and think about how much time we’re wasting coming up with solutions to problems that don’t exist rather than dealing with real ones, I’m reminded of something I was taught by my mentors about church work: I can stand up here and preach about all kinds of things, but if I do nothing about them and you do nothing about them, then all we’re doing is saying nice words. Without action, those nice words mean nothing. In the words of Rilo Kiley, I would simply be preaching about “all of the good that won’t come out of us.”

Unsurprisingly, Jesus had something to say about this, too. Today’s gospel lesson drops us squarely back on top of the mount where Jesus delivered what is probably his most famous sermon. By this point in his ministry, Jesus had been traveling throughout Galilee, teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing all disease and sickness in the people he encountered. News of Jesus spread throughout Syria and drew crowds from all over, who followed this great, and wondrous miracle worker who showed again and again that he was imbued with the Spirit of God.

Breathe.

Atop the mountain where he delivered this sermon, Jesus took a teaching posture, sitting before a gathered crowd, which included his own disciples right down front. After sharing what have become known as “the Beatitudes,” Jesus shifted from speaking in

the third person, to addressing his followers directly. He went from saying, “blessed are *they* who...” to saying, “*You* are...” With this movement, he pivoted from blessing to instruction. He did not speak of what they should be or could be, but about *who they are*, now. Jesus said to his audience, “*You are* the salt of the earth... *You are* the light of the world.”

As we reflect on this passage, we are presented with some questions. What does it mean to be salt and light? What do these elements, salt and light, mean to us and to the world? We know that each one is found in nature. These are not inventions of humankind; they are created by the one who created all of us so lovingly. These elements, which are not produced *by* us, are nonetheless essential to our being. We cannot live without salt. We would not survive without light. Like salt and light, the disciples then as now, are not self-made, but made through the process of Divine love and grace. In other words, like salt and light, we are because God wills us to be.

Salt functioned as a preservative in the ancient world and as a part of the liturgical stuff of sacrificial rites. As we read Jesus’s words, it seems clear to me that Jesus was speaking of salt primarily for its role as a flavor enhancer. He speaks of the uselessness of salt that has lost its saltiness. Salt may not completely change the flavor of food, as some herbs and spices may, but it brings out flavors that are already there. It is not that the food is not good on its own, rather, it is that, used in appropriate quantities, salt’s savoury quality allows us to enjoy tastes that may be too subtle without its addition. If the flavor won’t otherwise come out, in comes salt to bring it out.

And if we think about it, light’s function is not that different from salt’s function in our lives. Once we develop object permanence as infants, we understand that just because we cannot see things in the dark, it doesn’t mean they have disappeared. At night, the world around us does not cease to exist, it is simply harder to see and access. Given its ubiquitous presence today, we might take for granted light’s significance in our lives. It’s not an exaggeration to say we would literally be lost without it.

Jesus also notes those times when salt and light are of no help whatsoever. As I noted earlier, Jesus draws our attention to salt that has somehow lost its saltiness. That made me wonder, how could salt possibly lose its saltiness? Well, salt must be *present* to fulfil its purpose, right? This is true for light as well. Light outside of the cave does nothing to brighten the darkness within it. Jesus does not say there is anything that can put out the light, only that it can be hidden. If hidden, what good does it do? The very *idea* of hiding a lamp is absurd—people do not light a lamp only to hide it. For these two elements, presence and visibility matter. The same is true of those of us who wish to share the good news of God’s kingdom and love with the world: our presence and visibility matter. What is all our goodness if we do nothing with it?

As we reflect on Jesus’s sermon, one final aspect we should consider is that neither light nor salt are needed in big quantities to make a meaningful impact. You all know I love to bake some bread. Now, I think it’s safe to say I’ll never get a “Hollywood handshake,” as on the Great British Bake Off, but I do enjoy the process and result of making bread. If you’ve ever made bread at home, you may know the difference a little bit of salt can make. Leaving the salt out of a recipe altogether (not that I’ve ever done such a thing) shows you really quickly just how critical that little bit of salt is to the finished product. Salt helps tighten the gluten strands in bread, making the finished dough stronger and able to rise properly. It gives the finished loaf a beautiful flavour. You don’t need *much* compared to water and flour, for instance, but you do need *some*.

If you’ve ever gotten up in the middle of the night for any reason at all, you also understand the difference even a tiny bit of light can make. It can be the difference between a safe walk to the kitchen and a stubbed toe or a pain-free step and the horror of a surprise Lego in the foot. In all kinds of ways, a little bit of salt and light can make all the difference in our lives.

As Christians, we are called to be salt and light, to go into the world understanding that our presence can make all the difference in it. I look out into this congregation knowing that each and every individual here has, in big ways or small ways, made a difference in my life and the life of my family. Sometimes, when we see all the trouble present in this broken world, we think “I’m just one person. What good can one person do?” Part of

Jesus's point in using the illustrations of salt and light in this passage is to let those listening know that no matter how small they may feel, no matter how insignificant they may be in the larger Roman world, their presence matters. I think sometimes that we, as a small church, think we don't or can't make a big impact in the larger world around us, but that's simply not true. We have to know and remember that our goodness matters to this community and to the world. Even if all you've done is to make a difference in one person's life, you've done good. Do not be discouraged and withdraw because you think you can't make a big impact.

As a church community, as the body of Christ, we must continue to push back against any inclination that we should become an insular people, separated from the wider community around us, withdrawn into worship alone. Looking back at the prophets, we can see that God requires us to do more than participate in worship, no matter how meaningful it is or how often it is practiced. All the ritual in the world should not and cannot distract us from our ethical obligation to pay merciful attention to others, especially if they are "the other." Doing good in our communities in big and small ways is vital to our Christian call.

As Jesus reminded the crowd before him, we already have what we need to engage in that work. We *are* salt. We *are* light. When God created all of us, God called us good—and how could we not be; the divine spark has always been within us, and it grows brighter the more faithfully we nourish it. We may be few, but as with salt, light, it is not quantity that is important; a little can go a long way. Look at the book of Acts and see story after story of one or a handful of disciples making a difference one community at a time. See them manifesting their goodness in the world no matter the cost, whether that be all their belongings or their very lives. It would have been easy for the disciples to give up after Jesus's death and resurrection—to withdraw to their homes and move on with their lives. The Roman Empire was hostile to their ways, murdering their own teacher. But that's not what they do. They know that, despite all the struggle, brokenness, and danger, they must go into the world as the salt and light Jesus called them.

In world like ours, we often worry that humanity is hopelessly lost, that humankind has fallen so short of God's glory that it has nothing good left in it. Jesus is saying that there is good; we just can't get it out. In a way—though not remotely from a religious perspective—that's what Rilo Kiley are singing about in this song: the good that just won't come out. Why won't it? Why can't it? What's standing in its way? The answer, I think, is simple: we are. We get in our own way. We dream up all kinds of red tape and political arguments for why we can't help others. We seek solutions to imagined problems instead of trying to solve real ones. We think about all the reasons why we can't do everything, and talk ourselves out of doing anything. We, members of humankind, make it much more complicated than it needs to be.

The good can come out of us. I believe it can and Jesus does, too. We don't have to stand there on a frozen lake shaking our fists until we eventually turn to dust. We can do something. We can go into the world and bear good fruit by doing good, living up to the Way Jesus taught. There, atop that mountain, Jesus said that humankind is already good, we just need to let that good out. Jesus spoke many words, but they are almost always preceded and followed by action. All of the good in Jesus came out of him. I wonder... how might we find new ways to bring the good out of us.

Amen.