

## Called to be signs of God's solutions

[Augsburg University Chapel, September 2, 2022]

Matthew 5: 13-16

### ***Salt and Light***

<sup>13</sup> *"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 under foot.*

<sup>14</sup> *"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup> People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> 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.*

Good morning. It is a joy to be gathered here again, in this sacred place, where we come together every day during the academic year, to worship, to pray, to celebrate, to mourn, to be God's people. May God bless our time together in this university and in the world.

We come together again in a time fraught with daunting challenges: political polarization, racial reckoning, climate disasters, economic disruption – and we so long to do something, to find a way forward, to craft solutions. And yet we also find ourselves frustrated, stymied, not sure how we can be salt and light when the world seems so broken.

Here, I find a helpful guide in the work of the L'Arche community, which has long made a distinction between being a sign and being a solution. When the challenges before us are so daunting, we are called, not to fix all of the world's problems, not to solve all that befalls us, but to be signs of God's grace, and mercy, and love. To be salt and light. So, what does that look like?

It is reported – perhaps apocryphally, though certainly plausibly – that the late, great theologian and pastor, Joseph Sittler, once suggested that the whole of the Christian faith can be summed up in this liturgical phrase, "from you no secrets are hid." The "you" of course is the God in whom we profess faith – and with that remarkable claim, we live with the gift of faith that frees us for lives of discipleship. No secrets are hid, indeed!

I believe that the remarkable claim that no secrets are hid from our awesome and loving God is the foundation for discerning and embracing our calls to be signs of God's solutions. Because all of our secrets are known, because our God came into the world and redeemed our secrets, we are freed – freed to lean into the promise that God has for all of creation.

Hear these further words from Matthew's gospel that offer us clear direction for our lives of faith in the world – to live as those freed to be neighbor – to be signs of God's solutions:

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward. (Matthew 10: 40, 42, NRSV)*

My sense is that what we hear in this gospel passage is one of the central – and most radical – of all of Jesus’ teachings. Here is the call to be signs of God’s love for the world.

And it focuses on this simple practice of giving “even a cup of cold water.” Let’s think about what that might mean for us. I don’t know about you, but I don’t carry cold water with me everywhere I go. Even if I happen to have a biker’s water bottle with me, it likely has been sitting in the sun and is not going to offer chilled refreshment. And if someone needs a cup of cold water, it’s not going to be easy for me, I’m going to have to go out of my way to get it for her. And herein lies the gospel claim that Jesus makes on all of his disciples – whether 2000 years ago or today. A cup of cold water. Canadian theological educator, Laurel Dyskstra, suggests that this passage challenges us with the claim of radical hospitality. She writes, “Prophets have no subtlety, no appreciation for the daily compromises required for getting along. And while truly good people don’t trash the place, they can make you really look at your own life and upset your routine. Disciples and little ones are perhaps the worst of all. You know who they are: no money, no bag, no coat, bad-smelling, and talking about mercy. To get a cup of cold water, they have to come right into the kitchen.” Right into your kitchen, right into your life. Now that is radical.

I often wonder about this claim of radical hospitality upon each of us in our university, which aspires to be a welcoming community, but too often out of fear and insularity and ignorance, turns away from those we are called to serve – especially those on the margins, those most vulnerable, those who are oppressed, those who are traumatized. And so we are called, and...

*It begins with our openness to the stranger in our midst.* The world is filled with such fear and most of that fear is grounded in our anxiety about what we don’t know or understand. Jesus knew that. Those who teach you in this place know that. You know that. And I believe that it is because we know how fear paralyzes and distracts and fragments that we come together in this community to seek education, to learn about new and strange things, to broaden our perspectives on the issues and people and systems that define our world, to seek even to figure out what it all means. I think about the student who was with me as part of a service project in our neighborhood, who noticed a Somali woman in traditional garb, with a suitcase, attempting to hail a cab on Cedar Avenue. After several cabs passed her by, the student crossed the street, asked the woman where she was headed, hailed a cab for her and made sure the driver knew where to take his passenger. That morning, our student learned a life lesson about otherness and privilege – about the fact that he, unlike some of our neighbors, did not have to worry whether or not a cab would stop – but that student could just as easily not chosen to cross the street to be of assistance. A cup of cold water. Right into the kitchen. Are we open to the strangers in our midst, who might teach us important lessons?

*Hospitality is more than random acts of kindness, it is a way of life.* I think that one of the great temptations of the way in which we read scripture – passage by passage, often out of context – is that we lose sight of the radical claim it puts on us to live as people of the book, of the gospel. This really isn't just about inviting someone into our kitchen for a cup of cold water, an act that might push our comfort zone for a while but that will not fundamentally alter our way of seeing and being in the world. This is about a life of hospitality, a life reshaped by the claim of the gospel to live as the people of God, a life in community that is often messy, even sacrificial, but that ultimately is about faithful and grace-filled lives that proclaim God's reign.

*The world so needs our lives of radical hospitality.* This is serious business, my friends. Our church was founded upon the greatest act of hospitality we could ever imagine, the act of a gracious and loving God who entered into our world so that we might know God's radical welcome. And what did we do – what did the world do – but reject God's hospitality? There you have it. Out of fear, ignorance, injustice and hate, we turn our backs on God's hospitality, God's abundant and eternal welcome. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him," the gospel proclaims. But God knows how much the world needs radical hospitality, and so God abides (perhaps the loveliest word in all of scripture), God persists, God fulfills God's promise for God's people. For God loved the world so much, God sent God's only Son... We are called to be prophets of peace, to work for justice and fairness, to feed the hungry and heal the sick, to be the word made flesh in the world. A cup of cold water, Jesus teaches us – strangers right into our kitchens – lives of radical hospitality, no matter the cost, no account for the joy.

We're in good and gracious company – called by our gracious God, from whom no secrets are hid, who has redeemed our lives so that we might heal the world, so that we might join in God's loving and reconciling and justice-filled work for the world, so that we might be signs of reconciliation and love in a world so in need of reconciliation and love.

One final story, this one about my daughter Maya's baptism – it seems relevant to this moment. Maya was surrounded by family and friends at her baptism, including her older brother, Thomas. As my dad baptized her in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spilling the ceremonial water over her head, Maya let out a great cry, and her brother, always quick to get a word in, shouted out for the entire congregation to hear, "Maya, shake it off like a dog." And I say as much as we might like to shake off the role of faith in our lives – to shake off the call to be God's signs in the world, to forget that we are called to be salt and light – to doubt that no secrets are hid from our awesome God – it is, of course, impossible to do! Thanks be to God. Amen.