

Sermon – Epiphany Five – Christ Church, Garden City

Matthew 5:13-20

Today might be considered one of the holiest days of the year – if you are a football fan. Super Bowl Sunday is known the world over. Not only does the game promise excitement but the TV ads and the half time show get about as much attention as the actual game. As a resident alien in your midst coming to understand the rules of US Football has been a litmus test for me about my continuing assimilation into the culture of this great, yet complex, country. The more games I watched the more I have come to understand the game's rules and strategies and through a greater understanding I've been able to enjoy the game much more.

Last week the gospel readings started a journey through Matthew's account of Jesus sermon on the mount. We can imagine Jesus forming a huddle with his disciples reading them the next play that they need to make in their journey toward to a fuller life. Last week we reflected on the beatitudes as the first few verses have become known, and these set out nine types of people that Jesus says are favored by God.

This week the discourse of Matthew moves on to the next important play Jesus tries to instill into his team of disciples. He might be saying to them that they haven't made it all the way to this point in their lives by just following the standard plays, mechanically executing each play with the hope of winning God's favor. No, they have made it as far as they have because they have claimed a different spirit through Jesus Christ and are now playing in a new league. Anyone might be able to snap the ball and make the play but it takes a team with a unified spirit and purpose to make those life plays time and time again without losing heart.

In the huddle with the disciples Jesus paints an illustration of who they are. First the salt of the earth. Salt was so important to the community because it was used to preserve meat and made their food taste better. So it was a commodity they were very familiar with. If salt lost its saltiness what use would it be he says. You can't put saltiness back into the crystals so you throw it out and get a new supply. How easy it is for salt to be diluted.

Likewise Jesus illustrates for the disciples the importance of being the light to the world. This is the core image of our Epiphany season. Jesus came into the world to be a light for the nations and so now the disciples are being reminded they too at the lights of the world. When a light is lit it is for a purpose and it is not to be hidden away. The huddle message is "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Jesus made it clear that he did not come to overturn the law or the prophets, rather to fulfill the law and the prophet's testimony. It is important to bear this in mind because what Jesus says during his time with the disciples is for them not to try and overturn the law, or ignore it, but rather to fill out the Law and help the disciples see the possibilities

of a fuller way of being that can lead to a fuller life. In essence Jesus is teaching his disciples to be a distinctive group of people who now must transact the borders between two worlds and remain effective in both.

As Christians we live in the world holding our faith and values along with our political views on what constitutes good governance and ethics. Sometimes these two can be in tension and sometimes they might be in alignment. It is our role as Christians to live out the gospel first and foremost and allow the gospel to shape our lives. This can be tough as the constant tug between faith and politics can dilute our saltiness and dim our light. There is no greater issue today than our response to the needs of refugees. How do we balance their need for protection with our need for security?

Contemporary theologians Stanley Hauerwas and William H Willimon have written a very interesting book titled *Resident Aliens – A provocative Christian assessment of culture and ministry for people who know that something is wrong*. The thesis of the book is that a Christian community can be a distinct colony of people who for all intents and purposes would be ‘resident aliens.’ Sounds a bit sci-fi doesn’t it.

The first section of the book asks the questions whether it is possible to live as a distinctive group of people who must transact the boundaries between two worlds and remain effective in both. The second section asks how we might develop an ethic for life centered on Jesus Christ that is accessible and practical. Finally, they discuss how we, as ministers and leaders, lead this type of community and manage the inevitable conflict that occurs at the margins of the two worlds. I’d like to use these as the foundation for our time together over these next three weeks.

The authors turn to scripture, and the words of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians, to provide them with the foundation for their thoughts on church. Paul says in Philippians 3:20 that “our citizenship is in heaven” (NRSV). Paul encourages the early church in Philippi by pleading with them to stay the course and follow Jesus Christ’s example and not to fall away and follow the earthly example of their persecutors. He then reminds them that in 3:21 the “body of our humiliation ..[will] be conformed to the body of his glory”.

As Jews, drawn to God in Christ and living far from Jerusalem, the Philippian and other early churches were familiar with being an alien in a foreign land. The authors refer to these communities of God as a “colony” stating that “the church is a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another. In baptism our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another, and we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves, resident aliens”. The colony then is a community within a community.

The kernel of the Christian community evolves out of Jesus Christ who calls us to be a part of a movement of people. The Presiding Bishop refers to this as the “Jesus Movement.” The gospel accounts give us the story of Jesus’s journey with his disciples in their homeland and explains how peoples lives were changed by coming to know him.

Therefore it is the gospels that must inform how Christian communities develop and how the ethics of those communities are to be birthed.

So how is a church to transform itself into the worshiping group, prepared to carry a new Jesus Christ focused ethic into the world? Contemporary Christians must intersect with mainstream liberal democratic culture but it is the way we intersect that is important if we are to be a truly transformative gospel-driven church. The authors argue that the church has found itself a participant in societal culture, that “our politics determine our culture” and that we are drawn to serve the world. However in doing this we have often given approval for societal actions, be it wittingly and unwittingly, even the extreme event of physical and cultural wars.

Both the “activist” church and the “conversionist” church glorify the politics that they support. However, it is the “confessing” church, the church where the congregation is determined “to worship Christ in all things” that is the “radical alternative” where “trusting God to give the rules, which are based on what God is doing in the world to bring about God’s good results”, results that underpin the colony of faithful people. The true witness for Christians they say is through “the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith”.

As much as we want to say and believe that our church is a colony of resident aliens – believers of God in Christ, apart from the world – it is typically hard to live out. The power of contemporary culture is corrosive on all but the strongest. Technology, politics, pop-culture and capitalism erode our sense of community and drive us to “self-centeredness, loneliness, fear, superficiality, and harried consumerism”. However, within our own faith community we should be able to find respite from the world through mutual faith, love and hope offered to us by the ‘body of Christ’.

The community can stand strong if it is Christ centered and seeks to understand Jesus’ journey on earth toward the kingdom. Therefore the key focus of the church community should be on God, as it is God that has dominion over the world, and not the power nations who think they do. The word of God through Christ and the prophets should inform our lives fully and this way our lights will continue to shine brightly and our saltiness will not be diluted.