

“At The Heart Of It” – Mat 5:13-20

Have you had enough snow to last you all winter? A week ago most everyone here in Vancouver was breathing a sigh of relief, having weathered one big snowstorm and feeling that winter was finally over. I was a little more cautious, reminding anyone who would listen that there was a relevant expression, namely “January thaw”, referring to the phenomenon of a brief teasing thaw in January that was quickly followed by a seemingly endless spell of more winter. It’s a reminder that weather is a complex subject, not to be taken superficially.

The same could be said about today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel, namely that is it a particularly complex passage, with confusing if not conflicting messages, and so requires a great deal of skill in navigating the troubled waters and dangerous reefs that lie waiting to sink the unwary. In addition to two little examples, both of which are sort of familiar to people – you know, in that clouded, “I know what it means even if I haven’t thought about it” kind of way, there is a seemingly harsh longer section that raises difficult questions. Worse yet, those examples are not quite as clear as they might seem. The complexity is heightened by considerably differing versions of the shorter examples by the three Synoptic Gospel authors – Mark, Matthew, and Luke. And as a final challenge the longer section appears only in Matthew. Alright, enough whining from me – let’s take a run at it and see if we can hear what God wants us to hear.

We’ll begin by looking at the problems: take the first example, for example – that highly-in-demand-recently precious commodity – salt. “You are the salt of the earth” we are told, by Matthew. Sounds good, doesn’t it – even like a compliment. However, neither Mark nor Luke are quite so generous; indeed Mark’s version opens with, “everyone will be salted with fire” (Mk 9:49) and ends with an injunction not only to “have salt in yourselves” but to “be at peace with one another.” Presumably if you have the consuming fire of salt within you then you need the additional exhortation to not be at war with each other. Luke opens with the same phrase that can be found as the core in all three Gospel accounts: “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness ...?” And that’s where it starts to come apart. Mark asks, “how can you season it?”; Luke and Matthew together phrase it, “how can its saltiness be restored?” Given that we understand that both Luke and Matthew used Mark’s Gospel as a prototype for theirs, quite likely some twenty years later, it seems quite probable that there was a great deal of discussion going on in the early church as to just what this expression meant, and so both of them expand it a bit. Both of these two later authors talk about the now-zestless salt being thrown out, either to be trampled underfoot or worse yet consigned to the manure pile. I usually hear Luke’s closing “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” as being perhaps a bit of a frustrated admission that he doesn’t understand it either, but that’s just me.

Similarly, the familiar saying about hiding one’s light under a bushel reveals a divergence among the three Gospel writers. It is quite likely that Jesus used this example several times, for it appears in the Gospels in different places and in different contexts. Mark, in the earliest version, has Jesus asking the question as an introductory explanation regarding parables. By contrast, both Matthew and Luke have it phrased as a statement instead of a question, and Luke actually includes it twice – 8:16 and 11:33.

Matthew then goes on to include the longer section on not abolishing the law or the prophets, and this is perhaps the most difficult part of the text to understand. The difficulty arises from the apparent contradiction between the complete acceptance of the old religion here and other passages that sharply contrast the two (e.g. v.33ff re the swearing of oaths.) Or take for example the “new commandment” Jesus offered in response to the testing by the Pharisees as

to which of the commandments was the greatest. Or his revision of the role of the Sabbath. Or all the times he challenges the righteous (i.e. the rigid observers of the law) with, “you say ... but I say ...”

So, how can we approach this complex and challenging text and come away with a meaningful understanding of what God is saying to us? I think if we step back, take a deep breath, and then take a common approach to all three sections, beginning with the longer last section and working towards the first one, we will begin to see a common theme.

The approach common to all three sections that I am suggesting is to isolate the key point or central concept, and to focus upon that key point without being distracted by supplementary text. For example, in the longer final section of the three, if we identify the key point as “I have come not to abolish [the law and the prophets] but to fulfill them” we have a powerful statement of purpose from Jesus that can be understood to be consistent with the rest of his teachings. According to the Interpreters Bible the expression “to fulfill” means “‘to fill’; i.e., ‘to enforce’ or ‘to express it in its full significance.’” Not to do away with the law and prophets, but to bring out the underlying meaning and importance, as in loving God with all you are, and loving each other as each has been loved. This brings into focus a motivation for being and a way of being that pushes back against an insistence upon rigid observance of rules no matter what collateral damage is done through that observance.

A similar thoughtful focus on the imagery of salt leads to a similar understanding. Again, if we focus on the central idea of salt as a seasoning – setting aside the somewhat ‘over-the-top’ additional images of stomping into the ground or dumping on a manure pile – we have an image not only of zest but of balance. We are all familiar with the characteristics of salt as a seasoning – too little, and the result is bland, tasteless, lifeless even. Salt is so important to our human diet that it seems to be the oldest economic commodity in human history. Evidence of salt mining and trading goes back beyond the edges of discernable history, and indeed the evidence of animals identifying and using communal salt sources goes back even further. We need salt to live. However, at the opposite end of the scale – too much salt – the situation is even worse, making food unpalatable at best, and toxic at worst. In fact one of the greatest challenges to developed society today is the over-consumption of salt, driven largely by the discovery that high salt content coupled with a particular ratio of sugar creates an addictive reaction – you simply can’t get enough of those golden fries!

The third example, that of the light, also fits into this emerging category of a way to be and a way to act in faith. If we focus on the central and common (to all three Gospels) idea of putting the lamp on a lampstand to provide maximum illumination then we come away with the understanding that faith is to be lived in such a way as to be not only visible to others but an attractive and guiding force for others as well. The idea of “hiding one’s light” comes awfully close to today’s all-too-common, “I’m spiritual but I’m not religious” kind of faith, doesn’t it, especially if we understand the whole message here that being religious doesn’t mean being rigidly righteous but rather implies reaching out in God’s love to others in response to being loved.

Well then, it seems that if we can filter aside what might be considered expansions upon what Jesus was saying, and concentrate on the central focus of each of these three injunctions, the message that emerges is not quite as complex as it first seemed. Moreover, that common central message is very consistent with all of what Jesus was urging from those who would call themselves not only believers but followers. We are not only to have some zest in our faith, but also to “pass the salt” to others, to enliven them with the same zest for life that faith brings (dare

we say, as in “life abundant”)! Not to be so overly zestful that we are toxic, causing people to spit out faith like overdone anchovies, but with just the right or appropriate spice of life eternal. We are urged to let our faith shine, not just in splendid isolation upon ourselves, but as a beacon of God’s redeeming love in Christ, illuminating for all we meet the way to the love and acceptance and grace of God. And in living out our faith in this way we will be echoing Christ’s fulfilling of the entire law and prophets through implementing the great commandment to love God with all that we are and to love each other as we have been loved, and in so doing to find fulfillment of his promise of life, and life abundant. At the heart of it all we find not only a message we can live with, but a truly life-giving message ... thanks be to God for this gift in Christ!