

For the Glory of God and the Good of the World

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Matthew 5:13-21 (Year A; Epiphany 5)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/for-the-glory-of-god-and-the-good-of-the-world/

Fight or flight is a well-known stress response that occurs when hormones are released in your body in situations of stress, prompting you to stay and fight or run and flee. So, if I run off the platform this morning, you'll know why. A call weekend can be full of joy and stress as well.

Fight and flight are a broader collection of natural bodily reactions, including freeze and fawn. These are identified reactions to stressful, frightening, or dangerous events. It is how our system tries to keep us safe. The fight response is your body's way of aggressively facing head-on any perceived threat. Flight means your body's impulse is to run from danger. Freeze is your body's inability to move or act against a threat. Fawn is your body's stress response to try to please someone to avoid conflict.

Our responses in times of stress or danger vary among us and even within us. In some situations, we may fight. In others, we may freeze. No matter the response, the goal is to decrease, end, or avoid danger and return to a calm, relaxed state.

We are aware that individuals respond to stress in these ways. But so do families, organizations, communities, and even nations like the nation of Israel in the time of Jesus.

In our passage today, the immediate audience for Jesus's Sermon on the Mount is the nation of Israel, a people captive and oppressed under Roman rule. As a people familiar with captivity, questions often arose around tables and watering holes and in courtyards concerning who they were to be and how they were to live as the people of God while under Roman control. To these questions, each of the different groups of first-century Judaism had its response. Some wanted to fight, taking up weapons to overthrow the empire. Some wanted to fawn – going along with the ways of the occupier. Some wanted to flee, so they retreated to the ghettos or the desert to focus on deeper private study and strict obedience to the law in pursuit of purification.

We can relate to these stressors and these responses. Some today are ready to fight, determined to overthrow and replace the people and systems they live under. We can understand their frustration over living in a political or social climate they disagree with and

want to change. And some Christians seek to retreat from the world, seeking to avoid anything of the world until they die or Jesus returns, whichever comes first.

To a people divided in their responses to the stress and danger of their day, Jesus preached this sermon. Jesus confronted the *fight* response in verses 43-45 of chapter 5 by teaching enemies were not to be hated but loved, not to be resisted, but to be prayed for. Jesus also challenged the flight response in our passage today by teaching Israel that they should not withdraw from the world around them, hiding their God-given light under a basket.

Instead of fighting or fleeing, Israel was to be faithful. They simply had to be who they were.

And who were they? Jesus says, “Y’all (the Greek word here is plural) are the salt of the earth. Y’all are the light of the world.” Both salt and light were so basic, so essential to everyday life at the time of Jesus that he didn’t have to say anything more to this crowd. Salt preserved food. It healed wounds. It was used as payment for Roman soldiers. It was required in the sacrifices and offerings of the faithful. Jesus used salt as a metaphor to remind them not to fight or flee but to be faithful and flavorful. Be who you authentically are – the people of God. As they exhibited the love and character of Christ in their comings and goings, in the ordinary of each day, in how they engaged the world rather than fighting or fleeing it, they would make life better for all and make God known.

They were to be authentic, and they were to be visible. On this fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, we continue to reflect on light. God created the light. Jesus is light in the darkness. And we, even with all our failings and flaws, are the light of the world. Jesus says, “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others.” No one would think to light a candle and then cover it with a basket or clay pot. It wasted the oil and light. Like a city on a hill, his followers were to shine as beacons of goodness, grace, and hope. If they do this, people will see their good works and glorify not the light-bearers but the Light itself.

Jesus wanted his disciples’ faithful living to be authentic and visible, done for the glory of God and the good of the world. Jesus wants us to be what we are – the salt of the earth and the light of the world regardless of circumstances. Neither salt nor light exists for themselves. They only fulfill their purpose when used and poured out. Jesus says we are the activity of God in the world, adding flavor and illumination so that people will see our good works and glorify God.

A while back, someone asked the preacher and writer Eugene Peterson what he would say if he wrote what he knew would be his last sermon. He replied, “I think I would want to talk about the things that are immediate and ordinary. In the kind of world we live in, the primary way that I can get people to be aware of God is to say, ‘Who are you going to have breakfast with tomorrow, and how are you going to treat that person?’” Peterson suggests we must stop

thinking that being a Christian means always being part of only obvious religious contexts. We just need to pay attention to what the people around us are doing most every day and then help them do it in ways that glorify God. “In my last sermon,” Peterson said, “I guess I’d want to say, ‘Go home and be good to your spouse. Treat your children with respect. Do a good job at work.’” We need to be salt in the real world, which involves genuinely being with real people, listening to them well, and treating them as the little images of God they are all.ⁱ

Peterson, who wrote *The Message* translation of scripture, writes Matthew 5:15-16 in this manner: “Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”

How do we do this? I want to share with you some things I’ve heard in the past month from members and participants of First Baptist Church. I share this not for us to boast but to be inspired. We are not salt and light for our glory but for God’s glory and the good of the world.

- One member told me that everywhere he goes in our community to volunteer or serve, someone from First Baptist is already there serving. This church is everywhere, he said.
- Another member emailed me this note. “I’m discovering all the quiet ways so many are ministering and willing to minister; it’s just blowing me away. God is at work among us, enabling the church to be the church. The Spirit is blowing, quiet, and gentle, and we are beholding His glory in each other. Jesus is beautiful!!!!”
- In a recent discussion at our men’s prayer group, the discussion focused on some who were helping fix up the home of an ill member, some working with the unhoused in our community, and the recent news coverage of our work with other faith communities to help resettle refugees from Afghanistan as our neighbors and friends. Someone in the group remarked, ‘things are on the move.’

These are just comments from the last month and do not begin to capture the many ways this community is salt and light. You do not show up in the world in this way for recognition or reward. You are salt and light because y’all are salt and light. You are being what you are as people who walk in the ways of Jesus for the glory of God and the good of others. Instead of fighting or fleeing, Jesus wants us to be faithful, engaging our world and reflecting the goodness of God. Let them taste and see. We do this by being people of the Beatitudes, which Jesus teaches in the verses before our passage today.

Who are the salt of the earth? They are the humble, the ones who mourn, the meek, and those who thirst after doing what is right in the world. Who are the light? They are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who receive abuse for standing up for what is right.ⁱⁱ

Pastor Mary Alice Birdwhistell reflected on an important lesson she learned about light during Advent a few years ago. She wanted to end each Sunday in Advent by lighting a candle from the Advent wreath and exiting the sanctuary with that lit candle to visually communicate our calling to carry this light with us into the world.

We, pastors, have great intentions usually, but our ideas don't always go as we imagine them.

As she went to pick up the candle at the end of that first Sunday of Advent, she realized she had no free hands. She held her Bible, worship folder, notes, and more in one hand and a hand-held microphone in the other. The only way to carry the light was to set some things down, to let some things go. So, she did.

Now, with a lit candle in hand and some relief, she began briskly walking down the aisle to exit the sanctuary. She looked down and noticed the flame had almost gone out because she was moving too quickly. Immediately, she slowed down in order to keep the flame burning. The congregation, who maybe missed the decision about what to sit down, most certainly noticed the abrupt speed change and began to look at her with a look, "if you don't move it along, we're going to be late to lunch."

Mary Alice remarked, "in those 60 seconds of learning to carry a candle with me down the aisle, I quickly realized that all of these things would be true for us if we hoped to carry this light beyond the church walls, too."

Are there things we need to let go of to tend to the light within us and be light to our world? How can we slow down, to walk, and live with more intention to keep our light burning?

I can't tell you the answers to those questions or how you should go about doing this. It will be different for each of us. But I can say, friends, that tending to the light within us will be some of the most important work we do as light bearers. To not do so is to intentionally put a bushel over the lamp and make it useless when we are meant to shine.

I don't exactly know what you will do, where you will sprinkle your salt, or where you will shine your light, but I know this. In whatever ways you do that, First Baptist Church, wherever you do that, you will make the goodness of God known.

Y'all are the salt of the earth. Y'all are the light of the world. For the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

ⁱ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2020-02-03/matthew-513-20-2/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-513-20>