



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“USING THE TOOLS GOD GAVE US”

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 15:1-6, Matthew 5:13-20

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, February 9, 2023
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Matthew 5:13-20

Salt and Light

‘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 underfoot.

‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 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, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

The Law and the Prophets

‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

On two previous occasions I served as an exam reader for our national ordination exams, and when people take those exams -- and all aspiring Presbyterian pastors do -- they are called upon to answer questions in the areas of Polity (which is our church’s government / how we operate), Theology, Worship and Sacraments, and, of course, most people’s least favorite...Biblical Exegesis.

They are given a passage, either in Greek or Hebrew, and they are asked to translate it / to demonstrate a basic working knowledge of the language.

Well, the question on this year’s Hebrew exegesis exam has caused quite a stir, so much so that there is a petition being circulated which asks, among other things, for an apology from those who crafted the exam.

Reason being, this year test takers were asked to look at the original Hebrew of Judges 19...and the concern stemmed from its content, which, I must admit, is a hard story / a sad story...it is a story of abuse and violence.

Those who are petitioning the use of Judges 19 as the basis of the Exegesis Exam are essentially advocating for test takers and readers, who, in their own life, may have experienced violence or abuse and for whom the story from Judges 19 may serve as a kind of trigger.

And I sympathize with that concern, I really do, but I also affirm that God has given us any number of difficult stories within the breadth and scope of the Bible, and, not just as pastors, but all of us -- we need to have some sense of how to faithfully grapple with those kinds of stories.

We need to know how to deal with such stories not only exegetically, but also pastorally and liturgically. We need to know how to deal with them contextually, because, while we may not have talked about abuse as openly 20 years ago, it is very much a topic of conversation in the world today.

I suppose, at some level, I also trust the process / I want to give the 24 people who over a three-year period of time discerned that the text from Judges 19 was an appropriate use of exam time...

On the other hand, maybe an exegesis exam, where there is already so much pressure to perform...maybe that wasn't the right context for discussing such a difficult passage.

I share that situation with you to bring up what is, I think, part of a bigger issue facing the church today; namely, the various opportunities that we have as faithful followers of Jesus Christ to bear witness to God's story of salvation in ways that are authentic and accessible.

I often come back to the challenges that some missionaries have faced when proclaiming the Gospel in entirely new context and among people who may have little or no frame of reference to Christianity...

And I think about just how important are the simplest metaphors -- how a missionary in a desert region and where the sun burns hot, how they have probably leaned into the imagery of "streams of righteousness" and "rivers of life," because water represents life to those people.

Now, this is not to say that ours is to be some sort of watered-down expression of the Gospel, and neither is it our task to make God's word pleasing to the ear. No! Our task is not to quicken God's Word in the hearts of those who hear it...that is God's work to do!

But there is a responsibility that is incumbent upon us to do our part / to know who we are talking to, and to present the truth of the Gospel in a way that they can understand it.

When Jesus preached his sermons and taught his parables, he used language that people could understand...he talked about lemon trees and mustard seeds and lamps and coins.

The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, it was based in real life. There was an actual risk associated with traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. A person could, in fact, fall into the hands of robbers. I think that's why Jesus told the story like he did...it made sense to people...they could relate to it!

When God talked with Abraham about the future and about how Abraham would, indeed, have descendants, and that they would be a blessing...what do we think might make for a good presiding illustration? In other words, how might God help Abraham to understand that all of what was promised would come true?

Would God choose to talk with Abraham about the intricacies of biology / how, like a cell, Abraham's descendants would grow, and multiply, and become numerous? Hardly!

God took Abraham outside and said, "Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.... So shall your descendants be." (PAUSE)

This morning's lectionary reading is a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Now, as many of you know, beginning Thursday, Dr. Danny Massie and I will be leading a group of 32 folks on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and one of the sites that we will visit is the Mount of Beatitudes.

And there really is something to the assertion that the Holy Land functions as a 5th Gospel, because the land itself opens a pilgrim's eyes to the stories that Jesus told in new and helpful ways.

For example, when standing on the Mount of Beatitudes there is a lovely downward slope, and one can see the Sea of Galilee at a distance.

Standing there we begin to understand how the sound of Jesus' voice would have cascaded downwards, and how people could have heard him from some distance away.

With one's back to the top of the mountain and off in the distance on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee are the remains of an ancient city by the name of Susita.

Susita was one of the 10 cities of the Decapolis, and it was built on a 35 - acre plateau, and a city of that size -- when we think about the light it would have put out -- it would likely have been seen from some distance, and maybe even from the exact place where Jesus preached his sermon.

Off to the right, and further down the Sea's coastline, is the ancient city of Magdala. And at the time Jesus was preaching, Magdala was known as a producer of fish, and, to preserve them, a tremendous amount of salt was required...and everyone within earshot of Jesus' sermon would have known this!

This is how the land helps bring Jesus' stories to life / it helps us to understand how Jesus may have made good use of his surroundings to bring the Gospel to life...

Because, when Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth," it is not insignificant that there was, in the distance, a city that marketed in salt.

And when Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden..." Isn't it fascinating to consider how there, in the distance, was a city called Susita / a city whose light could not be hidden.

Being in Capernaum and seeing Peter's home, which is where Jesus may have also resided, and to see how small it was...

And then to remember Jesus' words about how in his Father's house there are many mansions. Think about how excited people may have been to hear that / to know that in heaven they wouldn't have to live on top of each other.

Or when Jesus and his disciples were at Caesarea Philippi, and Jesus asked them "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter responded "You are the Messiah, the Son of God"...and when Jesus declares that the gates of hell will not prevail against it...

Imagine how practical and relevant Jesus' choice of words must have been to those who heard them! To those who knew that right behind Jesus -- right where Peter had made his confession -- that there in Caesarea Philippi was an enormous cave that people in the ancient world considered to be an entry point to the underworld / it was an altar to the God Pan...and it was called the Gates of Hades / the Gates of Hell.

This just further illustrates how Jesus used all the resources that were available to him / all the tools, as it were...used them to help others make sense of the truth about God.

It's not rocket science...it's a matter of being sensible. My wife Martha Ann teaches with Lee Ann in the 4-year-old class at the First Scots Kindergarten...and believe you me, they are not going to talk with the kids by way of complex algorithms...they are going to talk about letters and shapes and vegetables and plants and animals...they talk in a way that can be understood!

At some level, it is also about working to our strengths. Consider a church, comprised largely of skilled laborers. ...Should they embark upon a medical mission trip? Well, they certainly could, but it may not make as much sense as would the formation of a construction mission team!

Knowing who we are...knowing to whom we are speaking...it is all a part of how we use the tools that God has given us, the vast array of which are to be used for the glory of God...and this includes: the talents we employ / the stories we tell / the words we speak / the illustrations we use...it all matters! ...And it all has an impact upon the world and those who live in it.

It makes me wonder, what is the Judges 19 story that just may not make sense for us to tell? Or what are the mustard seeds or the lemon trees that we should be using in service to God's kingdom?

Oh, be we in elementary school or more well-seasoned in life, what are those easy entry points into a conversation...those circumstances of life / those stars in the sky to which someone else might be able to relate?

Where are the Susita's and the Magdala's? Where are those places / those landmarks in our own life that can help us communicate the claims of the Gospel.

Is it a "Souper" Bowl Sunday? S-o-u-p-e-r...that special offering that (Charlie Gresham / Cate Warr) reminded us will be taken up next Sunday? Is it a matter of claiming for the Gospel something that is secular? Using it to meet the needs of the world? Is that what we are talking about?

Or think about how each year in some form or fashion we take time to celebrate our graduates, recognizing the significance of finishing a course of study and moving on to something new? That kind

of celebration is not a uniquely ecumenical observance, but it is nevertheless an opportunity for the church to address life...and to do so through the lens of faith.

Throughout Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he says no less than 6 times, "You have heard it said" ...such and such..."but I say to you."

In saying that, Jesus was not neglecting the past...he was honoring the past / he was holding on to those things that had been previously said, but he also wanted people to hear his particular word to them at that particular moment in time...and, praise be to God, he said it in ways that made sense.

Friends, if we are to be light and salt... If we are to be for someone a helpful guide along the way... If we are to preserve the truth, and make others thirsty for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then we will need to use all of our resources / all of the tools that God has given us -- every single one of them -- so that, in the end, others may also give glory to our Father in heaven!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt, please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.