

2/5/17

The Rev. Robert H. Malm

Focus

Today, and for the next two Sundays, our Gospel readings come from chapter 5 of St. Matthew's Gospel. This is the first of the three chapters near the start of Matthew that comprise the concentrated teaching by Jesus known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus teaches his disciples what it means to follow him – how to love God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul and how we can love our neighbor as ourselves. Matthew's gospel begins with this long "sermon" on discipleship and it ends with the Great Commission – a charge to the Church to go into all the world and make disciples, baptize and teach.

One part of our mission statement at Grace Church reminds us that we are "a school for discipleship." We are called to make disciples. This is why our ministries of evangelism and education are so important. Working with newcomers, working with our children and teenagers, and our adult ministries including the pastoral work of the Community of Hope and the solid biblical, historical and theological grounding of EFM (Education for Ministry) all strengthen our "school for discipleship."

Our hope is to know Jesus' teaching and to try to live according to his teaching. Jesus encourages us using the examples of salt and light. This is Jesus focusing his message of love using two basic natural resources. Salt, especially in the ancient world, was far more than something used to flavor food. Salt was necessary to preserve food. Salt was important as an agent of healing. Disciples are called to preserve the teachings of Jesus. Disciples are called to bring God's healing love to the world.

Light illumines, it penetrates the darkness. Light enables growth. Light leads and guides. Light can be focused like a laser to bring power, a concentration of energy. Disciples are like light as we bring this clear penetrating focus of Jesus to the world. Light shines through the work the church brings to a world in spiritual darkness. Disciples are called to feed the poor, visit the sick, work for justice and peace. Our outreach efforts at Grace, our mission to be a "Community of healing and outreach" is our attempt to bring Christ's light to the world.

The focus is always Jesus. All that we do, all that we are, all discipleship is to make Jesus' love a reality. The focus is Jesus and God's love. This is how Jesus could say "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill." Jesus' discipleship of love fulfills the mission of God's chosen people, Israel. No longer is religion about law, with Jesus the focus is love, loving God, loving neighbor.

And this is our focus at Grace Church through our worship, fellowship, discipleship, stewardship, outreach, healing and education. Other parishes, other faith communities, may have a different focus. We know our focus here at Grace and it includes the wonderful traditions – fellowship – of the Chili Bowl last Sunday and our teenagers making hoagies for us on Super Bowl Sunday.

Atlanta and New England have focused teams; one is the best offense in the NFL; the other is the best defense. For football fans it will be interesting to see which team focuses on it's strengths while limiting the other teams strengths. There can be no victory without focus. That's true in sports and it's true in life. Without focus, concentration, preparation, what some call "stick to it-ness", persistence and perseverance, we drift, we are confused, we lose the gifts God has given us.

To follow Jesus, to be a faithful disciple is to be like salt, like light. The church has this high calling, this "Great Commission" to continue the work Jesus began, so that all may know God's love. Regardless of the world, and all the clatter, chatter, confusion, debate and noise, we need to stay focused on our call, on our mission, on Jesus' teaching and on God's love.

Matthew wrote his Gospel in a chaotic time after the occupying Roman forces had destroyed the Great Temple in Jerusalem. Roman oppression was at its most severe. Jewish religious leaders had little hope. How could a holy people coexist with such an evil political force?

Matthew's answer was to stay focused, to know Jesus, and to follow Jesus' teachings. Be salt; be like light: give glory to God; the Kingdom of Heaven is breaking through the darkness of Roman oppression.

So it was in the 1st century, so it is in the 21st century. One of the coaches in today's big game is famous for saying "Do your job." That's focus. We know our jobs as disciples. Let's support one another, do our part, make disciples, let our light shine.

Matthew 5:13-20