

Salty & Bright (9Feb2020)
Matt5:13-20; Isaiah58; 1Cor2

*I taught the weeping willow how to cry.**

Ken Burns did the series on country music this fall, and I haven't gotten past it yet. I keep digging in and discovering more old music. I also keep trying to work some of it into a sermon.

For one example, back in December, there was a line from a Psalm kinda echoing lyrics, "as long as the moon shall shine," from a great song with a really sad theme of the U.S. government breaking a treaty with the Seneca Nation that had been around since George Washington. The sermon ended up focusing on trees and not the moon, so I couldn't quite shoehorn in the country music.

But today I thought I would: *I taught the weeping willow how to cry, cry, cry.*

You don't need to know any more about that Johnny Cash song. My point is that it may be a good lyric, but J.R. sure didn't need to teach a willow tree how to do anything. It's instinct. It's just what it does. You might teach a dog to sit, but you can't teach an old willow new tricks. It weeps because that's who it is and that's what it does.

Martin Luther was an arborist in this way. When Jesus talks about a good tree bearing good fruit, Luther reminds us it is a simple descriptive statement, not an instruction. Horticulturally, you can't wag your finger at an apple tree until it grows bananas.

Adapting agriculture as a human metaphor, what makes you a tree ready to bear good fruits is simply that that's how God has made you, blessed you, filled you and nurtured you so that you do it naturally. Instinctively. As a tree, you're not taught how to bear good fruits. You don't need lessons or instructions. No sermon to cajole you into being a better tree, to try a bit harder to blossom really beautifully and give it a go with the best fruits you can possibly muster. God makes you a good tree; you bear good fruit. Voilà! End of story.

I know some of you are big thinkers,

adversarial for argument's sake. You want to place a certain confidence in human capability and say that even though you might not be able to teach a weeping willow, and you might not be able to teach an old dog, that you yourself are willing to learn. You want to be better. You'll make the effort maybe to become a better tree. I'll say no. You can try, but...

Next week in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will declare we can't so much as force one hair of our head to turn from white to black. Again, you might quibble that Jesus hadn't heard of hair dye. My niece can change all the hairs of her head a rainbow of colors weekly. Yeah, but...

Still later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will proclaim that we can't, by worrying, add a single hour to the span of our lives. That one may hit fairly hard, because we remain pretty self-certain that we can follow enough doctor's orders and exercise regimens and dietary nuances and health plans to add years and decades to our lives. Jesus says we can't add an hour, that it's all given by God, not our fretting.

So if it's all God given, maybe we'd be helped best with the less animate examples from Jesus today: You are salt. You are light. What light does is shine. What salt does is...be salty.

Again, if you are still trying to teach the dog tricks and try to cultivate the tree to be better, if you change hair color or try to maximize your hours, then with these examples Jesus is point blank saying: it-is-what-it-is. Light either shines or it's not light. You don't need to tell it to shine. It just does it. We cannot make ourselves light. Jesus wasn't implying we should be brighter intellectually (as Paul will show us) or that we should try to beam ourselves up.

Salt that's not salty seems clearly to be not salt. Maybe it's pepper. Maybe it's bland. Whatever it is, if it's not salty, we can pretty well define it as not-salt. And Jesus wasn't telling you to spice it up a notch by being saltier.

You are salt. You are light.

I've spent all this time reiterating this because almost everything I read this week seemed to miss the point. Again, we've got this self-reliant

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpeOipJmsXM>

tendency that wants to keep it within our own capacity. Everybody seems to want to jump in with these words from Jesus and start explaining: Okay, here's how you should shine more, brighter, better. If you're going to try being a light for Jesus, here's what you need to do. Or if you're more in the salt camp, here's how to get salty and increase your salinity and be tastier.

Poppycock! Claptrap! Hogwash! Malarkey! Codswallop! And other funny dismissive phrases!

Jesus doesn't say this as an instruction, a project, something you need to do. He says it as a description: You are salt. You are light.

This reading may still strike some of you with Ronald Reagan's catchphrase making us as the United States into a "shining city on a hill." In that case, he intended it to show off, to draw attention, to say "hey, look at us."

I was reading last month that the use of that image in this country goes back another 350 years before Reagan.** In 1630, John Winthrop used this same passage to talk about the faith and practice of new settlers coming to this land. But for him it was a warning. You won't be able to hide what you're doing. Our example of that this week was the Iowa caucuses. If you want to be first in the nation, you better get it right because everyone is watching.

Whether Jesus intended the exemplary or the cautious, the world is watching. People will get a taste of you.

So if you are already salt, already light, if you're not needing instruction to be more or to try harder, maybe you're still wondering what these are. You recognize actual salt and light, I think, but it might be tough to offer a definition or description of light and of salt.

One starter is that these words from Jesus come right after the Beatitudes. Maybe you are salty and bright by living into your privileges of being dispirited, sad, nonviolent, merciful, hungry for justice, or persecuted peacemakers in the godly empire. Since those indicate blessings, it's a reminder that you're receiving your identity from

God.

Jesus goes on today to assure that he isn't trying to get rid of scripture. It seems important, that Jesus wants to connect to the Bible. Maybe in briny brightness you are connected to the Bible.

With that, we hear from Isaiah that it's not pious fasting, but a voice raised to call out wrongs. What God chooses is to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house. Remove the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil. These may come bursting, beaming out of you.

One of my favorite phrases in the Bible is in this passage: "you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." I was part of some planning for Wisconsin with a national group called Repairers of the Breach, which is working to carry on Martin Luther King's last Poor People's campaign now. Still more than that, though, the phrase "restorer of streets" makes me think of Tom Walsh's career for our city's traffic and transportation.

Or if that makes you feel like you need to try harder or be something special, someone special, then we hear from Paul that this isn't about lofty words of wisdom. I'd personally prefer to keep striving for such words. Instead I'm supposed to keep offering foolish words. It similarly means you don't need to worry if you don't have it figured out. We know nothing except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. It's not our intellect that makes understanding, but a gift from the Spirit. She gives what you need.

Maybe in the end we simply observe that salt and light are necessary for life. As you are salt and light, you are blessed in your identity to sustain life. Maybe there's something you recognize in these phrases. You may know it when you see it, even if you don't always see it in yourself. But it's there. There's no avoiding it. It's just who you are, who the Spirit is making you be, what God has blessed you to be, what you're formed into freshly as we gather here. You are salt. You are light. You can't be anything else. So be salty and bright.

** <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/puritans-as-a-city-on-a-hill-daniel-rodders/>

Hymn: *You are the Seed* (WOV 753)