

Sunday 3rd July 2022
Matthew 5:13-20
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Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- Called to change the world by our saltiness
- Called to change the world by our light
- Called to be changed

Let us take a moment to pause and pray before we dig in to God's word. Let's pray together:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit and reveal the truth You would speak into our lives this day.

Come now Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Over the summer I'm going to give you a little bit more opportunity to discuss and talk with your neighbor, not too much but a little bit more, and so, I've got an open question for us to have a wee think about and talk with your neighbor about. If you don't know your neighbor then always you can ask their name first before you begin a conversation if you wish. But here's your question for today - what is the hardest thing to change? Six months in it feels like the hardest thing to change is to get Innes to sleep through the night but, hopefully, we're getting there. But I'm sure there are many other hard things to change. What is the hardest thing to change? Turn to your neighbor and 20 or 30 seconds see what comes to mind. Over to you.

Well, sounds like there's a lot of ideas there. I won't get you to say them in case they're embarrassing or in case there's so many that we could be here all day I'm sure, but keep them in mind as we as we dig into our passage.

We've begun this new teaching series on The Sermon on the Mount and we've seen that what Jesus is going to teach us here has to connect somehow to the kingdom of God because the kingdom of God was His core message, it's what He embodied, it is what He brought into the world. And so, last week, we saw that His teaching was completely upending things for His original listeners, turning things on its head as He taught about a kingdom which was subversive and foolish and yet, people still chose to follow Jesus, they still were captivated by Him because of what He taught, what He led them into brought life. And so, as we come back into the passage let's remember He's still speaking to those same people. He's still speaking to our people who up to this point have really been told by the religious authorities that they're worthless, they're unimportant to God, that they're a bunch of sinners, they're spiritual zeroes, that's who Jesus is speaking to.

And so, as we begin at verses 13 to 16 we see that Jesus is saying something to a group of people that would never have thought this about themselves. He's saying that they're called to change the world. He calls them to be the salt and light of the world. Now, imagine these people, these people who have been downtrodden, who are just being written off by wider societies, especially the spiritual authorities, the religious

authorities, Jesus is telling them that He, they are to be the salt and light of the world and let's remember what their world was like as we pondered about last week a little a Roman dominated world, harsh, hard, unrelenting, with no mercy, where the strong triumph over the weak so often they. These people are to somehow change that world and maybe they thought 'That's just the hardest thing to change Jesus. There's no way that that can happen.' But they and we need to realize that He calls them, He calls us into this because we are able to change the world, we're able to impact the world because of the saltiness and light that is in our lives as we follow Jesus. He says to them 'You're the salt of the earth but if the salt loses its saltiness how can it be made salty again? It is of no longer good for anything.' Jesus calls His followers to change the world by their saltiness.

I was talking earlier with the children and saying that our two main ways that we think of using salt are flavoring things and so bringing out a greater flavor of something that would be otherwise quite bland and another way, I hadn't thought about the salt on the road for melting the snow thing, apparently, so might be a third way but the other way that I was particularly thinking of is how salt was used in Jesus' day to prevent or slow down decay. And we might think 'Well, that seems like two very divergent uses of salt.' But I wonder if in the kingdom they're actually two sides of the same coin. That as you slow down moral and spiritual decay, you might also then allow the flavors, the tangible feeling of God's kingdom to come forward much more. And so, they play off one another and so Jesus calls us to be the salt and light. But you can only have a salty influence Jesus says, if you're not losing your saltiness. We need to stay salty and I was talking to the chemists amongst us, or at least one of them, I just 'Is this right?' just to make sure of what I was reading. But salt doesn't actually lose its saltiness really, it's more it gets diluted or it gets mixed with impurities and so, for salt to be salty, it needs to maintain its distinctiveness from the surrounding bodies, not to be diluted too much or not to be mixed with impurities.

And so, thinking about the church, if the church is going to have this salty influence on the surrounding world, we need to maintain our distinctiveness. Not in a Amish kind of retreating into ourselves kind of way, but more in our the choices, the way we live our lives, the moral and spiritual dynamics of life, by embodying the Beatitudes and the teaching that's to come and what we read in the scriptures. And, you know, that is sometimes going to make both us and the world uncomfortable. I'm sure many of us have had to resort to a salt bath or putting a hand or a foot into salt to cleanse maybe a wound and when you do that you can feel the sharp negative feeling. Well, sometimes that's going to be the case with the role of the church and with our influence in the world. It's sometimes going to have a sharp negative sensation but to bring healing, to bring God's goodness into the world. But one commentator noted that sometimes 'to look at some Christians (we'd) think that their ambition is to be the honey pot of the world. They sweeten and sugar the bitterness of life with an all-too-easy conception of a loving God.....' Sometimes we don't want to be that sensation upon the world, we don't want to be seen in that negative way, we don't want to feel like we're having to be that voice, be that presence that causes that uncomfortable sensation but if we lose our distinctive saltiness then we end up either just becoming really bland and ignored in the

world, put to the side, or we just become this honeypot where we just sugarcoat everything. 'Oh, everything's okay. Your choices are okay. That's fine, I'm sure God will be okay with that because God is love after all' and that's okay but that's to misunderstand love and truth, light and darkness. We're called to change the world by our saltiness.

But Jesus says we're also called to change the world by our light he says 'You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden so, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.' Followers of Jesus are to be the light of the world and Jesus says that our light here equates to our good deeds. That is what our light is. It's the good deeds that of how we love our neighbor as we're called to do. But love of neighbor captures the whole of life doesn't it? If you love just them practically, you're ignoring them spiritually, but if you just love them spiritually, you're ignoring the practical side of life. To love your neighbor, you have to love the whole person, all of life.

And so, these good deeds are speaking to all aspects of life. To love in both ways and some of us need to hear that. I'm probably more inclined towards the spiritual and I need to think about how can I live practically. Some of us will think 'Oh, the practical's really easy, that's my thing.' But we need to learn to love in the kind of spiritual side of life as well to be that light in that way that we might point people towards our God.

But again, in the verse that I haven't quoted here, verse 15, Jesus warns that we can dim our light. Earlier, with the young people, I almost set the church on fire or I thought I might because I got the candle down and I had our wash basket, which is a kind of woven wash basket, over the top I was like 'Please don't put the church on fire!' We're obviously fine because we're still here. Because he says there's a danger of hindering our light. So, here's your, the second discussion question I got the children and our families to do this this morning. What hinders our light? What hinders our light? Okay, we're called to be the light of the world. What hinders, what covers, what conceals that light? So, 20 to 30 seconds, over to you with your neighbor once more. Just help yourself.

So again, there's probably many ideas here around what can hinder our light. One of the ideas that came out this morning was fear. We sometimes want to just hide away; we don't want to feel on display. Maybe it's sin, the wrong choices that hide that light and maybe that is seen through wrong priorities or being too busy that we feel 'I'm just too busy to be used of God in that way. I've got to kind of get my stuff done and when I get the time then I then I can do those other things.' It might be selfishness, that might be compromising. We don't want to be on display in that manner and so we compromise in some way rather than point people. We might just feel like we're not gifted in that way to be used of God, to shine a light. But, if we allow God by His Spirit to week by week shape our lives, reshape our thinking so that we can live His kingdom ways then we can shine a light that changes the world. And last week I spoke about the early church of how the early church just was such a radically loving church, that they set their day, their empire, actually on fire in some ways, not literally although they got blamed for that

but they upturned the Roman empire with how radically they loved their neighbor and there's many different stories you could pick on but I guess this was brought to mind again for me this past week because of probably things we've read in the news and that have then led to other things being in our news within Scotland, around changes within the United States of Roe versus Wade and of how the rights to abortion are changing there and I came across an article which reminded me of the radical love that the early church showed and I just want to read you a few excerpts from that to remind us of our Christian heritage, of why for so long that the church has said no to abortion but that we've probably also forgot some of the other dynamics that go along with that.

This pastor in New York writes 'How should we respond in light of a decision like this? First, we should note that Christians have historically placed a sacred value on children born and unborn. In the ancient world children were seen as commodities for family gain and nothing more than property to be disposed of if unwanted and in defiant resistance to this idea Christians stated that children are had inherent value in the eyes of God, been made in his image and formed in the womb according to His design. In the New Testament children are shown counter cultural value as being members of the Christian community, capable of both response and participation. This teaching, though, did not lead to judgment but to deep compassion. Compassion for disfigured children from failed abortions were adopted and cared for by followers of Jesus. Children given to exposure or infanticide were cared for and adopted by Christians and taken into their care. Orphanages sprung up often run and funded by Christians for unwanted children in the Greco-Roman world. Christians did not believe life did not just believe life mattered, they showed it with their actions in category defying ways, that have echoed through the centuries down to us.' He goes on to say 'Though the church has had a consistent vision of the sacredness of life it has, at times, failed to live up to that vision in a holistic manner. The church has, at times, moralized where it should have empathized, and sermonized what it should have sacrificed.' He has much more to say and he speaks also about being a champion of women, of women, of all women because Jesus showed that in His life and ministry, He's championed women. He concludes with saying, 'You may agree with me or disagree but I want you to know we will continue to be a church that seeks to follow Jesus with category defying love, cares about life as historically taught and shown in the scriptures, and loves and empowers women.'

The early church lived in a salty and light-giving way and they were willing to pay the cost of that both in what they said but also then in their lives. I wonder if we do? I wonder if we're willing to step up in that? it's all too easy to, I really hate those web, the news articles where you see Christians standing at the side and they're hollering at people. I just have no patience for that and do not think that Christians should be involved in such a practice. Are those same people sacrificially giving of their lives? Would they seem people have a child come and live with them? Maybe they would, it's hard to know just from newspaper articles, but it just doesn't feel like a salty, a light giving approach in the world.

So, how can we do differently? How can we, whether it's with the big issues, whether it's the other issues of life, like care for the poor, creation care, gender-based violence, the treatment and care of refugees? So many of the big ways that we could be salt and light. But it can also be in the everyday ways, the ways that we're getting involved in, the ways that you just stumble across almost. Like, I was talking to a colleague this past weekend and although she is ridiculously tired, she knows of a couple that have a number of children and they were just worn out at the end of the week and she said 'I'll take two of your kids just for a couple of hours to give you a break.' That couple are just new around church, they're just getting back into faith and one of them is just used to be an alcoholic or is an alcoholic and has been sober now for about 16 weeks and she just gave of out love in that way and shone a light into their situation. It could be in the most minute kind of ways. I was sharing with the children I was at Tesco this past weekend, come back with my trolley to the trolley park after getting the stuff in the car and the place is a mess, I couldn't get my trolley in and so I think right 'I'll just tidy this up.' so I can get my trolley in, sure it'll help other people but predominantly for me, and I turn around to leave and this guy, I have no idea who he is, he doesn't know me, he just says 'Oh, you're doing your good Samaritan thing for the week.' Like, completely unprompted. I'm like 'What did I do here?' so I just said 'Well, if the local minister doesn't do it then who is?' just to sew that wee seed and saying 'Well, you know, I am a Christian and I'm here doing this thing' and, yeah, I probably did it for quite selfish reasons but hey it benefits my neighbor. So, but just that we salt and it can be in the most small ways, the most unintended of ways, we can be salt and light, we can be that salt and light and change our world in little ways, and in great ways.

And this would have been really news to Jesus followers, as the crowd, as He's sitting with them, because no one would have ever said to them you can be that kind of influence in the world, that would have been for the religious, the militarily mighty and such like, not these little folk. And so, as He begins to upend their world, it seems, because we have to remember that this is a flow of a sermon and in the days of Jesus teaching was very didactic so it wasn't just a three-hour sermon that He gave or whatever. So, it appears that like there's maybe some conversation, maybe people are beginning to ask questions and so Jesus maybe hears some questions that say 'Well, if you're turning the world upside down in this area of life Jesus, are you going to do that with God's law as well. Like, is God's law may be less relevant? Can we just kind of ignore it a bit, or are you going to do away with it because it feels like everything the religious leaders are teaching us, you're turning upside down? So, are you basically just chucking out God's law?' And, to them, to that question He says, 'Do not think I have come to abolish the law of the prophets. I've not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.'

So, up to now he's been turning up the world of the Pharisees, I think now he turns the world of the folks He's listening to because, let's remember the lifestyle of the Pharisee, the teaching of the Pharisees. We have all the Old Testament laws, there's quite a few of them, to that the Pharisees added 600 more. Like 'Come on guys, 600 more?' And that was to help you understand how to live out the old teaching the Old Testament

teaching and the law, which just seems crazy. I'm sure the people would have been thinking 'Jesus, how is this ever possible? Like, the Pharisees are here and we're down here, there's no way our righteousness can surpass them!' But Jesus is doing this to surprise and shock them a little bit, to push them, to call them into His kingdom ways in a greater measure, because He wants them to have life, to know that good life, the life of the kingdom, if they'll understand Him properly.

And so, we need to do a wee bit of digging in here. When Jesus says about fulfilling the law and the prophets, fulfill means to fill out literally and what He means here depends upon the law that He's mentioned, referring to. So, if he's mentioned, if He's talking about the doctrine of the Old Testament then He's bringing a fuller a revelation of God, He's filling out the picture we have of God and He certainly does that. If he's talking about the prophetic aspects of the law then Jesus fulfills that because He completes it, He puts it into practice, He fills it out in that way. There were the ceremonial parts of the law and they were talked about as a shadow pointing towards something else and Jesus fulfills them as He dies on the cross, as he dies as a sacrifice as we sung about today and that's how He fulfills that. He also fulfills the law ethically. There are all the ethical teachings, the do and the don't do, the ways to live, and He fulfills that by doing it Himself, obeying that perfectly himself. But also, drawing out its true interpretation, and we'll get into more of that in the coming weeks with the Sermon on the Mount, so Jesus actually fulfills the law in all these ways and He's going to fulfill it in all these ways across the course of His life and ministry but in these latter verses where He talks about our righteousness, this righteousness that this surpassed the Pharisees. I think He's particularly talking about the ethical dynamics and the prophetic dynamics of the law because, let's remember, there were prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah who said things like this, 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.'

The Pharisees problem was not that they didn't have enough rules, it was that their heart was hard and prideful and distant and cold to God. That was their problem, because your heart determines your actions. Jesus says that 'out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks' of what's in us comes that darkness and no matter how meticulous your rules are, no matter how good your intentions are, if your heart is still not right in one particular way or another, then those rules and those good intentions will just be overruled by your heart. The Pharisees needed a new heart and it comes by receiving the Spirit of God into our lives and to us by Him dwelling within us.

To go back to that earlier question from the start of our sermon What's the hardest thing to change? the longer I live and I'm not particularly old, but the longer I live it feels like the hardest thing to change is a human heart, as a husband, as a dad, as a minister and all the ways that I just wish I could change, the human heart feels like the hardest thing to change.

And so, Jesus calls His followers not just to change the world, but to be changed. To be changed. That, actually, to be that light in the world we first need to have the light of

Jesus in us, to be that salt of the kingdom, that brings that saltiness of the kingdom, we need to know the purifying work of Jesus in our own hearts. So, we need that, we need God to be at work in us by His Spirit. And, just in case you're wondering, in verse 20 where He says 'You won't enter the kingdom of heaven and unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees' He's not teaching that you have to be good enough to get into the kingdom, He's trying to draw them into, to the wider teaching of the scriptures, that teaching that says it's only by trusting in God and being right with Him that you are then born again, you receive His Spirit and after that the Spirit's working in your life, will change you to bring forward that righteousness. So, if you see your character growing in the likeness of Jesus, even minutely, because it's a whole life journey, and it's never perfected this side of heaven, but if you're growing in the likeness of Jesus that is because the Spirit's in your life and that's there, He's there because you're in the kingdom, through trusting in Jesus and being born again. He's not teaching salvation by works, He's not teaching anything different from the rest of the scriptures, He's drawing them in to good news that there is a God who wants to be involved in our lives and change us from the inside out so that we can change the world as well.

And I'm sure the people of the day would have been thinking both 'Wow, this is amazing!' but also 'You're crazy Jesus! You're crazy!' Wow, because here's good news. I'm sure all of us have a way or many ways in our lives that we want to see changed. We see a darkness in us, we fly off the handle, or we're more snippy than we want to be, or we were more prone to moaning than thankfulness, or we've whatever it would be. There'll be a part of our lives where there's ingrained ways of darkness and the good news is there's a God who wants to be involved in your life and change you from the inside out. But, equally, the message that you can change the world is for you as well and you might be thinking 'Well, I'm just little old me. I'm nothing compared to this person or that person. I can't do this, I can't do that.' But actually, there's a God who says He will use you if you will allow Him. That, if you will invite Him into your life, if you will keep in step with Him, He will use you to change the world and who knows what that'll look like. It might be in the practical ways, it might be in spiritual ways, often the spiritual ways we just have no idea what to do and we're trying to resource us as a congregation to invest in that as well. So, you know of the card stall through and the hall and that's a great way to show to sow a seed in a very gentle way getting a card that shares something of your faith but, on your pews today, we just put out these reprinted books that we had a number of years ago and then there are some prayers. Now, you might want to pray them just at home but there might come time, a time when you want to pray with someone and you're like 'I'm not sure what to pray.' Well, if you've got this in your bag or in your car or whatever, then there's some prayers you might utilize. There are also some questions in there where you can be thinking about how to share something of your faith or what God's speaking to you, of what he's maybe saying through the church service to you. So, that we can practice amongst ourselves and in practice having and then carry those conversations out into today, every day as well. So, you might want to pick up one of these, they're at the end of your pews. We do have some more and that might just resource you as well so we can be a people who love our neighbor both physically, materially and spiritually, and be that that light and show that there is a good a God who wants to bring good news to our world and good news to

each of us because it all depends on the Spirit and so, let's close our time as we pray together and ask for the Spirit to come and fill us.

Our God and Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your word today. We thank You for the hope of these verses, that You call us to be salt and light in the world, that we can have an influence, whether it's in small ways or big ways. Often we feel intimidated by that but You call us maybe just to love the person in front of us, the next person in front of us. To shine a little of Your light into their life. Lord, help us to be that.

So, we ask for Your Spirit to come and fill us. Fill us to enable us to live Your kingdom ways and Lord, if there's an area of life that that we're longing to see changed, we're longing to live more in step with Your kingdom ways, then again, fill us with Your Spirit to overflow. Bring us into life and into freedom. Help us to be renewed and changed in our minds and in our hearts so that we can live that way, we can live in a way that is not concealing Your light or diluting our saltiness but which points to You and the goodness of Your kingdom, breaking into our lives and into this world. So, come Holy Spirit we ask in Jesus' name. Amen