

**MAGNIFICAT FAITH: SALT AND LIGHT; MATTHEW 5:13-20; FEBRUARY 9, 2020;  
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**A word on the text before the sermon:** Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount; his message is meant to evoke Moses' giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai so that Matthew's Jewish Christians will recognize Jesus as the new Moses. The theme that defines both the people of God Moses leads and the people who follow Jesus is the public nature of their witness to the faith.

God's charge to Abraham was for his family to be a blessing to all the families of the earth and the charge of Jesus to his disciples is to be salt of the earth and light of the world. In other words, the witness and work of the people points beyond themselves to a better world, a just world for all.

The verse that links last week's beatitudes with this week's charge to public faith is this: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account; rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." The 'you' in that beatitude is the same 'you' in Jesus charge 'you are salt and light.' When we are salt and light, we often take sides against what is popular and easy.

**Part I: "You are the salt of the earth."** The main character in the film "A Hidden Life" – which is based on true events – says to his priest early in the film that 'God gave us freedom and if we are free agents, then we are responsible for our actions.'

This is the underlying principle that drives the drama of an unknown farmer from a small village high in the foothills of the Austrian Alps who, in the first years of World War II, refused to sign a pledge of loyalty to Hitler.

His decision is made again and again as he is given chance after chance to pledge allegiance to the Nazi leader; yet even as the simple joys he relishes as a young husband and father and as a member of his tightly knit farming community are slowly taken away and he eventually, inevitably finds himself in prison, even then when he is given one last chance by his court-appointed Nazi attorney to pick up the pen, sign the pledge and walk free, he refuses and is sentenced to death.

The film is a timely reminder of what integrity looks like when, today, it is often compromised for political power and economic gain. This man's *faith* and belief that each person is a child of God enables him to resist a state that proclaims Arian supremacy.

What makes the farmer's decision compelling is his anonymity, his hiddenness from the movers and shakers of the world. His persistence despite his lack of impact outside of his small rural village reveals his depth of character.

As we sat in the darkened theater, watching this three hour drama play out, tension building, leading to its predictable end – a film that did not seem long because it was unedited, but was exhausting because it is beautifully made and true to life; a story of evil in the midst of the pristine grandeur of the Austrian Alps – as we sat there in the theater, I marveled that this farmer's stand was now a feature length film, a work of art 80 years later; and that people here and around the world are viewing the defining moment of his life; that his decision in 1939 would speak with such relevance to our time increasingly in the grip of autocratic rulers.

We never know completely what the consequences of our actions will be; this is the two-edged sword of the farmer's decision; he doesn't know and so he must trust, just as every follower of Jesus must trust, that our attempts to be Christ-like will be pleasing to God and of use to the world; especially when our attempts go against the grain of what is popular makes life difficult for ourselves and even perhaps those close to us.

The title of the movie "A Hidden Life" was taken from George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* in which she writes of her main character: "the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive; for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on un-historic acts; and the fact that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

Isn't this what Jesus wants of his followers; that our presence would permeate and diffuse itself like salt in the communities in which we live. Christlike behavior enhances, brings out the true essence of individuals and relationships and communities and makes the human family better.

The Austrian farmer could not see the final, lasting effects he would have on those whose paths he crossed.

From his wife and two daughters, to the villagers, to the mayor of the village, the priest of his parish church, to the police who arrested him, the prison guards who held him, and the judge and lawyers who condemned him, his fidelity to his faith was scattered like salt by his words and actions.

They seeped in to the lives of all those people and the collective consciousness of his farming community, the Austrian nation and even Germany where he lived out his final months. The farmer's hidden life was a reminder of what is good and noble and true about human existence and community, in a time and society fallen from grace.

I am not saying that he changed the hearts of the nation or that this movie will change what seems to be the pursuit of self-gain in our time at the expense of cherished values; it is not the man or the movie, it is God working through the man and revealed in the movie that constitutes a public witness that points to higher ideals and a better world.

There is no proof that it does so, nor proof for the farmer that his decision to sacrifice himself and his life with his family would be redeemed or made right.

All he had, all we have is the trust that our allegiance to the 'growing good' as George Eliot calls it, to a Christ-like life as I am calling it today, is what God wants and what the human family needs.

**Part II: "You are the light of the world."** Jesus told his followers that they were not only like salt that diffuses itself and disappears into the life of the believer; but we are also, Jesus said, like light that does the opposite of disappear and makes visible everything and everyone. A light on a hill cannot be hidden, Jesus says, and people do not light a lamp to put it under a bushel, but they put it on a stand so that it gives light to everyone in the house.

The farmer's resistance to Hitler was a light; it revealed the brutality of the Third Reich; it exposed the herd-like, fearful behavior of the villagers and their own violence directed to him and his family.

The farmer's faith cast a bright light on the abdication of the faith of his church – a bishop and priests – who capitulated to Hitler.

The light of the farmer's faith also illumined the path before him; there were scenes in the movie where the camera looked, if you will, down the trails of the foothills of the Alps where the farmer and his wife walked burdened with his decision; then it took us through the streets of the village where the villagers spat and catcalled at them; then we see the long, narrow halls of the prison where he lived out his last days, and finally the lonely ride in the truck through the streets of Berlin with other death-row prisoners to their final destination.

The path on which the farmer's allegiance to God took him was always there before him. He paused on several occasions, wondering if he was able, if he was meant to continue his journey of trial and persecution and he never wavered.

Isn't that what we pray for when we face a hard decision – light to know which way to go. The power of the film and the power of Jesus' words today is that when the path is hard and the journey lonely and we are called to persevere we find strength, God does not give us any more than we can handle as the farmer's wife quotes St. Paul.

Finally, Jesus tells his followers to 'let their light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.'

Public witness. We are often reticent in our 'enlightened' secular, anything goes society to let our light shine before others for fear of seeming too zealous or 'religious'. We prefer to blend in, to keep quiet in the locker room or at the dinner party if a statement of bias or bigotry is made; rather than protest with a letter to our elected officials or showing up at a rally we're content to lend quiet support from home.

But Jesus calls his followers to let their light shine before others – like that farmer in 1939 or like Mitt Romney last week when he searched his soul and concluded that because of his Mormon faith that charges him with the grave duty of taking the constitution of this country seriously, he concluded that he could not join his party in support of the President but must vote in support of article one – the abuse of power – to impeach the President.

Romney was the only Republican to do so and he said when he announced his position that he would incur the wrath of the President and of his Republican party. Indeed, he has – the words of condemnation from virtually every conservative media outlet and pundit are remarkable for their claim that Romney is a betrayer, a deserter to their cause; as if he didn't have the right and duty to vote his conscience.

Whether you agree with his stand or not Romney's public witness to his faith, his following where his religious conviction and principles led him even when it meant he would be shunned and threatened with retaliation is not only impressive for his integrity and courage it is his constitutional duty and right.

Others who testified during the proceedings have been dismissed from as ambassadors and members of the National Security Council. They too, like Romney, are in the crosshairs of angry politicians and pundits who rallied around the President. Salt and light are a powerful combination. Jesus is clear, he came not to change but to fulfill the law and prophets. Whoever ignores even the smallest command will be called lowest in the kingdom of heaven. Rather, our adherence and public witness to the dictates of our faith is how we will enter the kingdom of heaven.

**Part III, Support from Isaiah and the Psalmist:** Hear the words from Isaiah today that call us to stand up for our faith: this is the fast that I choose says the Lord, “to release wicked restraints, untie the ropes of a yoke; set free the mistreated; break every yoke; share your bread with the hungry; bring the homeless poor into your house; cover the naked when you see them; then your light will break out like the dawn; you will be healed quickly; call and the Lord will answer; cry for help and he will say “I am here.” You will be called the mender of broken walls the restorer of livable streets.

And from the psalmist these words: those who adore God’s commandments are truly happy. The offspring of those who do right will be blessed...Their righteousness stands forever. They shine in the dark for others who do right. They are merciful, compassionate, righteous. They lend generously and are good people; they conduct their affairs with justice; they shall never be shaken; they will be remembered forever; they will not be frightened; indeed their hearts are firm, they are not afraid.”

Some of the most moving scenes in the film “A Hidden Life” are when the farmer comforts the other prisoners – a man deranged whom he calms by putting his hand on his shoulder; another man at the brink of losing his sanity he gives his bread to; and in the final scene a young man, maybe still a teenager, who sits next to him as they await their turn to go to the guillotine. The boy is shuddering in fear, he looks to the farmer who puts his arm around him, pulls him close, lays his head on the boy’s head. So the boy when he is summoned and dragged to the executioner turns and keeps his eyes on the farmer who looks back to the boy with love and compassion.

That’s “Magnificat” faith; faith like Mary’s that allows God to work through us and magnifies God so that all the world can see his wonderful works.

Faith that proclaims as Mary does in her song: “his mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation; he performs mighty deeds with his arm; he scatters the proud; he brings down rulers from their thrones but lifts up the lowly; he fills the hungry with good things and he sends the rich empty away.”

These are times for a public witness to our faith. These are times to let God work through us to resist, when necessary, what is popular and easy; what is unjust and cruel; these are times for you and me to be the salt of the earth and a light to the world. Amen.