

It's Only Fitting

Rev. Ann B. Day, Coordinator for the UCC Open and Affirming program Sermon for the installation of Rev. Rebecca Voelkel as the Program Director of the Institute of Welcoming Resources, August 22nd, 2006.

Not long after we are born, we begin to pick up signals about what is fitting and what is not when it comes to how we live. These signals vary from generation to generation—and depending on our ethnicity, religion, and so forth. Most of us, wishing to enjoy some degree of favorable reception among other human beings, try to get a grip on the do's and don'ts of what's fitting in word and deed in various situations.

One of my favorite stories about my mother, Leona, illustrates this effort. In 1922, her parents, Floyd and Annie, were bringing up five children in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. In the midst of daily life, as Floyd was busy selling his famous Indian Runner Ducks, and Annie was occupied tending the garden or baking bread for seven, they tried to communicate appropriate conduct to their offspring, dismaying an effort as that could be. So one evening when six-year old Leona was at the dinner table with the family, she decided to practice the hospitality to elders that she'd been taught. She turned to the guest at the table and said in her best entertaining-company voice, "Uncle John, you look like the last rose of summer." Thinking this was a surefire crowd pleaser, she was surprised to learn that the remark was not considered "fitting."

But it's not just in the South, of course, that such things matter. In understanding this as it applies to this part of the country, I have benefitted greatly from a little book about Minnesota by Ed Fischer.¹ Combining his guidance with my experience in the Twin Cities, this is what I gather:

If you're a Minnesotan, it *is* fitting to pepper spray a mosquito...[even if it is the state bird.] It is not fitting to offer visitors only one kind of cookie.

It *is* fitting to include bingo... in a... cultural events listing. It is *not* fitting to gossip about the Pillsbury Dough Boy.

It *is* fitting to honor people- - by carving their likeness in butter. It is *not* fitting to make snide remarks about Jello.

But it is not just in the 21st century that people show concern about this. In the first century, what's fitting mattered to the author of Matthew, though not in regard to Jello.

There is a lot we don't know about this rich, complex gospel. Vanderbilt Divinity School professor, Amy-Jill Levine, summarizes the situation this way:

"Scholarship on the gospel of Matthew is presently in flux. Debates rage over the social setting of Matthew's community... its relation to the synagogue...and its connection to Judaism..."² In preparing this sermon, I found that some scholars argue that the gospel is by a Christian author, who proclaims Jesus in contrast to the claims of Judaism, the two religions being distinct entities by the time the gospel was written, sometime around the year 85. Others argue, however, that the text is best understood as a Jewish work—that the author is not distinctly "Christian," in the way we use the term, because Christianity and Judaism were not yet separate. In this view, the gospel's author is, more likely, the leader of one of many sub-groups within late, first-century Judaism. In his commentary on Matthew, Anthony Saldarini terms this group "believers-in-Jesus," who acknowledged him to be the authoritative interpreter of Scripture and the Messiah, and sought to persuade other Jews (and perhaps, Gentiles) that this was true.³ Despite the various views about the setting and the author of Matthew, however, Amy-Jill Levine concludes that there is consensus about this: "...Matthew offers new life for all who follow Jesus."⁴

But what is this "new life" about? Foremost, it is about faithfulness to God—but as taught by and revealed through Jesus. Faithfulness is spoken of in many ways; it is about following in "paths of righteousness" for the Divine name's sake, and in so doing entering the "kingdom of God." It is about the centering of one's total self in love of God and neighbor—a precept fundamental to Judaism and to

Christianity.

The text read this evening is from the section of gospel which has come to be known as Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." Those listening to him, both disciples and, no doubt, a wider circle of people, learn of the kingdom's "blessed:" those whom God favors—those who are destitute, dependent upon God's grace, those who "hunger and thirst for *God's* righteousness" and are "pure in heart," focused on *living* the good will of God through attitudes and acts of mercy and peace-making.

The last two verses of the Sermon's opening section (often called the "Beatitudes") focus on those who are blessed when they live faithfully even under duress. In these verses, the gospel writer may evoke both the dangers faced by Jesus and his disciples, as well as the turbulent times of his own group, or both. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake;... theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 5:10)

The gospel text read earlier, about salt and light, follows immediately after these words about hardship. Salt and light were (and are) essential for well-being. Today we know that light (natural and artificial) is vital not only for greening the world, but for regulating our moods, and helping us not go bump in the night. Information from MN State University-Mankato (a very reputable institution) reminds us that, "Salt is needed by the human body in order to help muscles and nerves work, and to regulate blood pressure.... If the human body goes for a long period... without enough salt the body will desiccate and die."⁵ And in *Salt: A World History*, Mark Kurlansky comments about the importance of salt to the Roman Empire, under whose earthly rule Jesus lived:

"Not only did Rome want salt to be affordable for the people, but, more importantly as the Romans became ambitious empire builders, they needed it to be available for the army. The Roman army required salt for its soldiers and for its horses and livestock. At times soldiers were even paid in salt, which was the origin of the word 'salary' and the expression 'worth his salt' or 'earning his salt.'"⁶

In having Jesus call those who are in relationship with him "the salt of the earth," Matthew is likely also drawing on Jewish associations of salt with Israel's relationship with God, honored by offerings, as in Leviticus 13:3 "You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt." Like salt and light, believers in Jesus are vital, precious, and holy.

Those clustered around to hear Jesus teaching have just begun to smile as they think to themselves, "Hmmm, we are vital, precious, and holy!" when Jesus (wet blanket that he could sometimes be) troubles their thoughts: "What if... salt loses its saltiness?" he wonders. "How can you restore that? You can't; it's good for nothing and gets tossed out. And who lights a lamp and then put it under a basket? No one with any sense! You put it on a stand where it can give light to all in the house."

In short, this may be a Matthean pep talk. A way of exhorting those in his group (and all who would read or hear the gospel) to *be who they are* as believers-in-Jesus, to live as people of a heavenly kingdom that is both happening now and not yet realized. To do this even if they are insulted—and even, if like the prophets and Jesus, they face persecution.

New Testament professor, Daniel Patte, suggests that these verses emphasize Matthew's conviction about the heart of discipleship. As Patte explains: "one needs to have a life that is suitable for - or 'fitting' - one's vocation." Followers of the risen Jesus are to do "good works" not so that people praise *them*, but so that all people "give glory to God" (as Israel's vocation is the "sanctifying God's name.")⁷ Since you *are* salt - *be* salty! Since you *are* light - shine! It's only fitting!

Live in a way that fits your vocation. That sounds easy enough to me. Until I remember, that even on the best of days—when the sun is shining and I've had cinnamon toast for breakfast—I can have a tough time loving my neighbors, never mind my enemies. How much more demanding it is to be salt and light

when I feel threatened and fearful. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew these feelings and the urgency of giving fitting witness even when it's just plain hard. As civil rights marchers prepared for Selma, Alabama in 1965, he said to them:

"I can't promise you that it won't get you beaten. I can't promise you that it won't get your home bombed. I can't promise... you won't get scarred up a bit—but we must stand up for what is right. If you haven't discovered something that is worth dying for, you haven't found anything worth living for."⁸

We, too, who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, same-gender loving, two-spirit, queer people (to whom I shall refer, hereafter, simply and as "lgbt") and who are also people of many faiths, know what it is to feel threatened and be fearful. In response to our longing to serve the Holy, some have (as Matthew puts it) "uttered all kinds of evil against us falsely." (Mt. 5:11) And the overall landscape of religious life, while more hospitable to us than most people could have imagined fifty years ago, is still unacceptably indifferent, impeding, or hostile to our lives, families, and ministries.

In the midst of all this, we and our supporters have endeavored to be fitting. To live our vocation, engaging in acts of resistance—and of hope, upheld by the One who "leads us beside still waters" and "restores our souls."⁹ Together, a rainbow of colors, ages, abilities, theologies and experiences, we have given testimony to the truth of our lives and faith, prayed with those who weep, organized to change church and societal policies, gathered stoles that bear witness¹⁰, developed resources, spoken out in protest, and sung in rejoicing.

This evening, we resist again all that would deny us or anyone God's shalom, as we celebrate the installation of the Rev. Rebecca Volkel as pastor, teacher, and leader of the Institute for Welcoming Resources, of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. We give thanks to God and for all, past and present who through their courage, faithfulness, and service have made this covenant moment possible.

I trust I speak for this congregation when I say: Rebecca, words that come to mind when we think of you are: "vigorous love, impressive savvy, steady commitment... and *great* hair." But most importantly, perhaps, the word "trust" comes to mind, that which you place in God—and that which we place in you because we recognize you as a leader among us, as we seek to live to the glory of God.

Whatever our faith or spiritual path, this is Matthew's imperative to Rebecca and all of us: stay briny... and stay bright! It's only fitting that we do so, given our call to hold the sacred ground of our confidence that God intends our faith communities to be truly and extravagantly lgbt-welcoming and inclusive. It's only fitting that we do so, given our call to live hospitality and justice, day by day, until all who long to know *do* know that we shall "dwell in [the heart] and the house of God, forever."¹¹

Rev. Ann B. Day
August 22, 2006
Lyndale, UCC, Minneapolis, MN

Scripture Texts: Psalm 23 (sung) and Matthew 5:13-16

Preached on the occasion of the installation of the Rev. Rebecca Voelkel into ministry with the Institute of Welcoming Resources, a program of NGLTF.

Credits:

1. *You Know You're a Minnesotan If...* by Ed Fischer. Adventure Publications, 1999.
2. *A Feminist Companion to Matthew* Amy-Jill Levine (with Marianne Blickenstaff) Eds. Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, p. 70.
3. Term and view presented in: *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* by Anthony J. Saldarini. The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
4. Levine, *Ibid*.
5. Website article "Salt" on University of MN- Mankato site (<http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/history/trade/salt.htm>)

6. *Salt: A World History* by Mark Kurlansky. Penguin Books, 2002, p. 63.
7. *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith* by Daniel Patte. Fortress Press, 1987, p. 69-70.
8. King quoted in *The Beatitudes for Today* by James C. Howell. Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, p.89.
9. See Psalm 23: 2-3
10. Refers to The Stoles Project, lgbtq liturgical stoles collection now part of the Institute for Welcoming Resources some of which hung in the sanctuary during this service of installation. (www.welcomingresources.org)
11. See Psalm 23: 6