

American Hustle

By: Penny Holste

February 9, 2014. In Matthew 5, the scribes and the Pharisees were hustlers. They used the law of God to their own advantage against others. They refused to admit it and to seek forgiveness. But that is the difference between them and us. Pastor Penny preaches today on this text, and reminds us that Jesus doesn't call us hustlers. Jesus has other words for us. He says we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

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We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

His father owned a company that didn't do very well because people took advantage of him, so he determined he would be different. He would be famous and rich, at the expense of others if need be. She left a small town that didn't seem to notice her and struck out to find fame and fortune, and she didn't care if she had to shove people aside to do it. And they, the man and woman, met at a party and instantly were a dynamic duo. And they went through life garnering glamour and goods on the backs of other people. They sold fake loans and counterfeit art. They bribed politicians. They even got a little close to the Mafia, and they did alright for a while. Okay, now that is the plot of a movie. It's called, if you've seen it, "American Hustle." But it's not just a movie. It was loosely based on the Abscam event, where politicians were bribed or did accept bribes. But it's also called *American Hustle* because I think it really does describe what we have learned to accept as the way the world goes: you need to watch out for yourself. You need to stretch and get what you need. And if you hurt other people, or if they somehow get hurt, don't notice it. Just carry on. I mean, we're not surprised when we hear about a politician accepting a bribe anymore. It seems the way of life. Or we hear about a high financier getting inside information to make a deal. It's normal.

It's so normal, this idea that we look out for number one even at the expense of others, that it gets into our blood. Somebody does something dishonest at work or at school and we look the other way. We've got our careers to worry about, or our friends or our status. Don't get involved. Someone proposes building something that would be great for the community, but it might jeopardize the value of your home, so you oppose it. I mean after all, isn't the American way to elect officials that will help us? We don't think too much about whether it will help the state or help the country or the world, but that's the way government works: they help us. And we use resources that we know deep down are going to be needed in the future, but it's so hard to give up the comfortable life. In so many ways we have bought into the American hustle, and we don't even notice when we work to get what we want at the expense of others.

But Jesus doesn't call us hustlers. Jesus has other words for us. Jesus says you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world. And he said that because we have been given a different understanding of success, a different reason to feel good. We have been given this view of goodness that means we look out for each other. We heard that in the Old Testament. God said, I don't want all your false fasts. What I want you to do is be merciful, clothe the naked, take the homeless into your home, feed the hungry. Then, then I am pleased. That's what is beautiful. That's what is good. And we have this vision. But how do we carry it out in a world that is constantly trying to shape us into hustlers? Well we can't do it alone. And if you read the gospel in the Greek, you will see that when Jesus says you are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth, that word "you" is plural. He's not saying it to one person.

He's saying it to all the followers. He's saying it to us as a community, as a congregation. And we know that it makes a huge difference that we do things together. It is such a beautiful thing to be part of a community.

We had a meeting a few nights ago thinking about the vision of this church. And as we talked, we began to wonder: although we value the community, do we value the gifts of the individual members? Maybe some of you have thought: why don't they ask me? I know about this. Why hasn't anybody asked me to do this or my advice, or come to me? And we began to think that maybe it's for shyness or lack of knowledge of who has what gifts, or just because we're in a hurry, we may not have asked people to use their valuable gifts for this community. And then on the other side, there's that part of us that may not want to use our gifts. We might think, oh no, another meeting. We may not see the value that we have to offer, the value of what we have right here.

There's a story about a pastor who came to visit a parishioner who hadn't been coming to church for a while. And he graciously received the pastor, and he knew what the pastor was there for. And he had made a fire in the fireplace, so he invited the pastor to sit down. And they sat there and he waited for the pastor to say what a pastor would say. The pastor didn't say a word. After a few minutes the pastor got up and he pushed the screen of the fireplace over, and took the tongs and he took a little piece of wood that had been burning right in the middle of the fire, and he put it over to the edge all by itself. And then he sat down. Together he and the parishioner watched as that little piece of wood just got darker and darker, until it was hardly even an ember. And then he got up and he took the tongs and he put it back in the middle of the fire, and it burst into flames. And then he said well, I guess I should be going now. And as the parishioner walked the pastor to the door, he said: thank you pastor for your visit, and for your fiery sermon. And he said I'll be back in church next Sunday.

We need each other. This is how we get our fire. This is how we keep on the level path. We need each other, and we're best when we're together. We think of what the church has done together, how we have stood up against racial discrimination, abuse of women, prejudice against gays and lesbians, how we have built hospitals and nursing homes and had a whole social service network, how we have helped stop world hunger. This is what we can do together. And even a congregation, like the salt, can influence all that is around it. When Keith was on his internship at Our Redeemer in Indianapolis, already the neighborhood was getting kind of crime-ridden. But the congregation refused to move, as they have up to this time. They have a beautiful plan. They say if we keep our building up, if we come driving in there every Sunday morning, we're helping the neighborhood -- even if it means that we hire a guard to watch our cars for evening meetings, which they do.

There's so much we can do together. But is it enough? We hear that haunting last sentence of the gospel: unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But you see, the scribes and the Pharisees were hustlers. They used the law of God to their own advantage against others. They refused to admit it and to seek forgiveness. And that is the difference between them and us. Every Sunday we publicly confess our sins. In our own homes we probably say the same to God, and we receive that forgiveness. And so Jesus says to us: I didn't say you *will* be the salt of the earth. I didn't say if you work hard enough, you *might* be the light of the world. I died and rose to say to you: you *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world. All we need to do is to live what we already are -- to live life, watching out for others, and being able to step back ourselves. Not an easy task, but we have each other, and we have the power of the Holy Spirit. And we have the promise that when Christ returns, everything will be transformed and we will all see together the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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