

February 9, 2020
Jed Linder
“Who We Are”
Matthew 5:13-16



SCRIPTURE

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

OPENING

Let us pray... *Gracious God, we thank you for this time to share together, and for your son Jesus Christ. May his teachings inspire us, O Lord, to become a people more fully after your own heart. Pour out your Spirit upon us now, and open our hearts and minds to your word for us today. In Jesus name, amen.*

We are switching gears a bit, after Jane’s powerful sermon series, and going back to the lectionary. But it is still Epiphany, so we will stick with the season’s focus on who Jesus is, and Jane’s focus on what Jesus taught.

Today’s passage comes at the beginning of the famous “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew’s Gospel. Up to this point in the story, Jesus has announced that the Kingdom of God is near, he has called his disciples to join him, and he is now giving instruction on what it means to be disciples living the way of God’s Kingdom. This, then, leads to one, fundamental question our passage seeks to answer for all of us disciples of Jesus: who are we? And since we can’t separate out who a person is from how a person acts, we are also asking: what, then, are we to do?

To answer these questions, Jesus gives two primary metaphors to consider. The first is that the disciples are the “salt of the earth.” The second is that they are the “light of the world.” Thus, all disciples should be acting accordingly. Now, this is a very famous passage, so I’m sure a number of you have heard it before. Regardless, it is a passage we should return to regularly to always refresh our identity and call as followers of Jesus Christ. As such, I want to examine these two metaphors a little closer, before exploring their implications for our lives. To begin, we’ll look at what it means to be the “salt of the earth.”

SALT OF THE EARTH

Five years ago, I ended up in the emergency room with two kidney stones. Now, for those of you who haven’t experienced kidney stones, they were definitely invented before fun, because they’re not. One doctor, a female, even suggested they are as close to giving birth as a man will experience, although you don’t end up with a baby in the end. After my body finally expelled these two nuggets of joy, I was given the same medical advice from everyone to help

prevent future stones: “throw away the salt shaker.” Sodium is in so many things we eat and drink, now, that doctors are actually recommending that some of us watch our salt intake. This, perhaps, makes us the first generation of human beings to be paranoid about ingesting too much salt. But, this was not the case in Jesus’ day.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus’ listeners understood well how valuable salt is. Salt is a vital element of life, i.e., we can actually die without ingesting enough salt. Salt provides a unique seasoning to flavor food (cf. Job 6:6), hence the cliché, “it needs more salt,” used every time a meal tastes bland. It’s why American Episcopal priest, author and chef Robert Farrar Capon once said, deliciously, “to undersalt... is to omit from the music of cookery, the indispensable bass line over which all tastes and smells form their harmonies” (from *The Man Who Ate Everything* by Jeffrey Steingarten, p. 197).

Besides a seasoning, salt acts as a preservative for various foods, including meat and fish. This was essential before refrigerators and freezers. This may help explain why covenants between God and God’s people were often called a “Covenant of Salt” (e.g., Numbers 18:19; 2 Chronicles 13), reminding the people these agreements would not go bad, but would be preserved throughout time.

Finally, salt can act as a purifier or cleanser. Putting salt on a wound may burn, but it actually does clean the wound – it’s a remedy people have used for centuries, and, again, this use is reflected in the Old Testament. When ancient Israelites gave offerings to God, they would often sprinkle salt on top. This suggested both a purifying and a seasoning function in preparing an offering fit for the Lord.

Considering all this, it should be clear how valuable salt was considered to Jesus’ initial hearers. Jesus’ words would have been seen as a high compliment, but along with this identity would come a vital role implicit in their new lives on earth. Being a disciple of Jesus meant being a distinctive seasoning to the surrounding society, bringing Christ’s grace and love to those around them. Disciples would act to preserve covenants God made with the peoples, and they would play the role of purifier when needed. After all, salt has a bite to it, but it does purify the things that are unclean. This is the role the Hebrew prophets of old played when they spoke truth to power; specifically, they would offer course correction reminding others of their role in God’s covenants, thereby helping to preserve God’s good plans of love, justice, and redemption. This is what it means to be salt, and this is who Jesus’ disciples were, and still are. BUT, along with this declaration, Jesus’ issues a warning, saying, “but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?”

Now, chemistry tells us that salt, or SODIUM CHLORIDE, is highly stable, so it won’t actually lose its flavor. So, what did Jesus mean? Well, while salt can’t lose its flavor (or, identity), it *can* lose its ability to act as salt is supposed to act. In other words, salt can fail to function, and this happens when salt becomes corrupted. This means that when a little bit of salt gets mixed in with too many other elements, it becomes impure, and doesn’t serve all those useful purposes. It no longer seasons as well, if at all. It no longer preserves as well, if at all. And, it no longer purifies as well, if at all. When salt becomes corrupted, it is, ultimately good for nothing, and disciples need to be wary of this!

So, that’s the first metaphor Jesus uses: his disciples are the salt of the earth. The second metaphor Jesus uses to describe his disciples is “the light of the world.”

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Just like in our engagement with salt, we have to try to look at this second metaphor through first century eyes. After all, it is easy for us in the West, or even much of the contemporary world, to take light for granted. Today, we flip a switch and, *voilà*, light. It's as simple as that. But it wasn't always so simple. In the ancient world, when it got dark... it got dark. The prophet Isaiah describes trying to move about in the darkness as groping "like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes" (Isaiah 59:10). This is difficult to imagine today, but try to picture your first night in a dark hotel room and getting up in the middle of the night to head to the bathroom. You feel along the wall for that switch, hoping you find it before you trip over your bag.

Light is an invaluable thing, and Jesus' followers would have recognized this as another high compliment from Jesus. Light allows people and animals to see – we can see when people are doing right, and when people are doing wrong. Light gives us color, exposing a spectrum of diversity all around us. Light gives us energy, focused into lasers and converted through solar panels. Light even stimulates the body into producing vitamin D, which picks up our mood with a blast of serotonin during these long, dark, winter months. Light is a powerful force that *transforms* the world around it, bringing ultimate truth that exposes the internal and external darkness of life in the world. Light illumines God's creation, God's good purposes, and God's coming Kingdom. And as a church, gifted the great light of God given us through Jesus Christ (Mt 4:12-17, cf. Isa 9:2), we become a "city on a hill," shining across a shadowy and broken landscape; shining even into the darkest reaches. But, of course, just as with salt, Jesus warns that we can fail to act as light is supposed to act.

As Pastor Lyn showed us earlier, when a light has a basket covering over it, the light becomes worthless. So, whether or not the light is lit under there, it is of no use to anyone outside of that basket. Like the salt, the light *can fail in its function*. Light can fail to act as light.

WHAT THIS MEANS TODAY

One of the key features you may have noticed with both of these metaphors, is that neither SALT nor LIGHT actually exist for themselves – they both exist for others. Thus, when we act as salt, we are benefiting others. As salt, we bring with us the gospel, God's good news for the world, and flavor every place we go with the hopeful message of God's Kingdom. This is a distinctive message, and a surprising one. A counterculture message that upends the prevailing assumptions of a bland world in need of salty redemption. It's a message that declares (from the beatitudes, Matt. 5:3-11): blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn those who are humble, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers, who are called the children of God. And, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

These are salty values, and these values must not be corrupted by any of our other loyalties as if we simply baptize Jesus into our personal priorities. These are our *top* priorities, it's not the other way around... And, yes, these includes our political allegiances as we move into an election year... when salt is as vital as ever, as it warns us from blindly following partisan dogmas.

Further, just as vital in an election year, we must shine God's light all the brighter. We shine the light uncovering the corrupt and dishonest (which there seems to be no shortage of!)

as we speak truth to all who hold power. We shine the light exposing the demonic nature of our current political hatreds, partisan bickerings, and narcissistic quests for power over others. When we shine as God's light, we can actually change the system, the world, our country, and our state. Though it doesn't have to be so grand, because living as light always begins locally. Doing things like donating hats and gloves to those who are cold and in need. Doing things like serving food with LuLu's to the hungry here during lunch every Tuesday and Thursday. Doing things like speaking for and supporting the orphan, the widow, the refugee, and all people who are disadvantaged by their circumstances and in need of an ally. These are acts of light; they are shining, acts of covenantal love, justice, and mercy that chase away the dark. All it takes is a spark... just a single, small light to show the way.

This reminds me of a story one of my students told me when I was teacher assisting at seminary in Pasadena. He told me about a missionary friend who got stuck in a remote village in the Congo for several days. The village did not have electricity, and there were no big cities nearby. On one particularly dark and moonless night when he was walking back to the village with a group from the church, one of the pastors took out a candle and lit it. It was the brightest candle his friend had ever seen. The candle itself looked normal, but it cast so much light. He was confused: how can one candle produce so much light? Finally, he asked the pastor, "What type of special candle is this that it shines so brightly?" The pastor replied, "It's not special, it's a normal candle. It's just very dark." The man was amazed at how one, single light can shine so very bright in the dark.

I think this story was so particularly memorable to me because, sometimes while working in Hollywood, I would feel surrounded by some pretty strong darkness. Things like violence, sex, addiction, exploitation, and hatreds do not happen only in front of the cameras, but behind them as well. Into this darkness, a single light can shine quite brightly, as one of my old pastors reminded us one Sunday years ago. I don't remember the passage he was preaching on, but I remember the story he told about the show *Friends*. Apparently, he knew one of the writers or producers there, and at one point in the season, when the writers were putting together an upcoming episode, they planned a particularly vicious joke about Christianity. Now, these type of jokes are not all that uncommon in Hollywood, but this joke never made it to air. You see, one of the writers reminded them that their receptionist – who was very well liked, hardworking, and kind – was a practicing Christian. So, they ended up dropping the joke, and went in another direction.

Now, beyond illustrating the kind of impact one, distinctive, salty light, can make, this story stuck with me for a second good reason: the receptionist at *Friends* back then was actually sitting right next to me because the receptionist at *Friends* was actually my sister. My sister who was acting as salt and light, changed the worldwide, pop culture conversation that week. She acted as salt and light, because she is salt and light... just like we are salt and light. *This is who we are.*

CONCLUSION

Jesus makes it perfectly clear: his disciples *are* salt and light – that is what we are. It's not who we are *sometimes*. It's not who we *will* be. It's not who we are *if* we work hard enough. It is *who we are* right now and always.

And, I know, it may not seem like it or feel like it sometimes, because it is easy for our salt to get diluted and our light to get diminished if we're not careful. I think that particularly

here in the US we can have problems with this. On the one hand, many of our churches in the 20th and 21st centuries stopped going out beyond their walls, and, instead, became insular communities expecting the people to come to them. In these cases, the church building itself becomes a bushel basket, hiding the light for the world to see.

On the other hand, many churches that went out forgot they were a distinctive seasoning, allowing their salt to become corrupted amongst the world around them. Many churches seem to have forgotten who they are, and how they should act.

We can't ever let these things happen here at Saint Paul if we want to continue on in Lincoln. We have bright lights here in this church, and a salty message of hope, faith, and love to share with those around us. We might have to come up with new, and different ways, to shine going forward, but I have faith we can do it, together, by God's good grace. Because, after all, it's WHO WE ARE.

Let me close in prayer... Gracious God, Jesus tells us that we are salt and light and that our church is a shining city on a hill, but, it doesn't always feel like that. So, encourage us, Lord, hearten us, strengthen us, and empower us to more fully live out this ordained identity throughout our lives, and throughout the life of your church, Saint Paul, here in Lincoln, Nebraska. Praise and glory, now and forever to you, O Lord. In Jesus' name, amen.