

Stay Salty, Be a light

“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.” ~Matt. 5:13, 14

Matthew 5:13-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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A few Sundays ago we looked at what is known as the Beatitudes, which reflect God's blessings and favor, especially on those who struggle in life, like, “blessed are the poor in spirit,” or those who mourn, or are persecuted for seeking justice. Those verses begin the Gospel of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Immediately following the encouraging message of the Beatitudes we hear Jesus teaching about what discipleship looks like in the realm of God. And in this instance, he does that through the images and metaphors of salt and light.

The image of light is very common throughout the Bible, and we refer to it often, including in many of our hymns. The image of salt, however, is much less common. So let's begin by talking about salt, good old sodium chloride, NaCl – to you chemistry and geology types. **Table salt is so incredibly common and inexpensive today that we don't think twice about it. But not so, historically.**

I'm sure you've heard the following figures of speech, “That good person is the salt of the earth.” “I'd take what he's saying with a grain of salt,” or a “pinch of salt.” “You are worth your weight in salt,” or negatively, “That person is not worth their salt.” These idioms all have a basis in the historical understanding of the uses of salt. I found the following on an elementary science education curriculum website, msnucleus.org.

Salt is essential to life itself. It is used every day in many aspects of our lives, from manufacturing to water purification. It is also an essential ingredient for maintaining a fluid balance in our bodies.

Common salt, when mixed with ice, lowers the melting point of the ice, making it melt. Common salt is also used in many manufacturing processes. It is employed as a preservative or seasoning in food processing, for curing hides, and as a brine for refrigeration...

Salt, often said to be worth its weight in gold, has played a vital role in nearly every civilization since the beginning of time. It has served to preserve and improve the taste of food, it has served as money, and as a spiritual icon. Here are some examples:

- Ancient Greeks exchanged their slaves for salt
- Romans paid their soldiers partly in salt. By the way, the word 'salary' comes from the Latin word *salarium*, a derivative of the word *sal*, meaning salt
- The French Revolution was sparked, in part, by a salt tax
- Ancient Ethiopians used salt disks as a form of currency
- In the United States, the Erie Canal was built largely to transport salt
- In Slavic countries, salt is given to a bride and groom to symbolize health and happiness

With that background (which I shared more for my enjoyment than perhaps yours) let me ask: **What do you suppose Jesus meant when he used this metaphor, “You are the salt of the earth”?**

Let's take a necessary look at each word in this phrase. First of all, the word “You” in “**You** are the salt of the earth,” is **plural** in the Greek, not singular. We learn that the life of discipleship, the way of Jesus, is conceived as life within a **community** of faith, rather than simply an individualistic, isolated life or spirituality. Life in biblical times was highly communal, quite a contrast from the go-it-alone individualism of our modern culture. The Scriptures themselves warn constantly against the temptation of a privatized religion. But since you're here at church this morning, I guess you don't need to be reminded of that.

The second word in Jesus' metaphor, “You **are** the salt of the earth,” is an extremely important one. Before Jesus tells his disciples, including us, what we are to do, he tells us who we *are*. There was an ancient Greek ethic that urged people to “Become what you should be.” Jesus replaces this with the Christian ethic, “**Become what you already are.**” In Jesus' teaching, wholeness stands as God's gift at the very beginning, not at the end. Jesus didn't challenge his disciples, nor us, to try harder to become like salt, he tells his followers that they *already are* the salt of the earth. In other words, **we are not told to become salty, we are challenged to stay salty. That is, to be devoted and faithful followers of Jesus in the fullness of what that means.**

And the last word in the phrase, “You are the salt of the **earth**,” reminds us that we are to be more than just the salt of the church. **We are to be like salt to the entire world.**

For all the different connotations, meanings and uses for **salt**, it is believed that Jesus was referring to its most obvious quality as a **seasoning to enhance and add flavor to food**. On this point, biblical commentator **William Barclay** wrote over 60 years ago:

Christianity is to life what salt is to food. Christianity lends flavor to life. [He goes on to add however,] The tragedy is that so often people have connected Christianity with precisely the opposite. They have connected Christianity with that which takes flavor out of life.

That, in my opinion, is still reflected in the form of Christianity that is dominated by the imperative, “Don't do this... don't do that...” The early 20thth century Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. once said, “I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.”

That's a good lead-in to what Jesus states in his followup phrase. “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.” The point is, **salt serves an important purpose. It has a function. When it no longer functions or serves that purpose, it becomes useless and irrelevant. Jesus offers a challenge and a warning. If we, as disciples, deny or fail to engage in mission and ministry – as in putting our faith into action – then we, too, can become, in all practicality, useless and irrelevant.** That's how many, especially the younger generations, perceive organized religion today.

But you know, I am proud of this congregation. For by your witness over the decades, College Hill is known throughout Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, and in many parts of Tulsa and beyond, as a “salty” church, so to speak. And that's a good thing. **To**

use a different metaphor, we are kind of like the ants in the pants of organized religion.

We exist as a congregation in order to build community and engage in relevant mission. This is not to say, however, that there isn't an inward and internal personal dimension to discipleship. Rather, it's a way to emphasize and highlight the importance of our discipleship through its outward and external dimensions.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus continues with another metaphor, saying that "You are the **light of the world.**" As bearers of light, Jesus declares that we are like a city built on a hill that cannot be hid, and like a lamp that it used to light a home. In what seems obvious, Jesus reminds us that the function and purpose of a lamp is to provide illumination in dark places. It must not be hid, therefore, under a bushel basket where it does no good. In an email sent out from the national office of More Light Presbyterians three years ago, then-new Executive Director, Alex Patchin McNeill reflected on this scripture passage from Matthew 5. Alex, who you may be interested to know is a female-to-male transgender person, offers the following challenge in connection with the times when we hide our light under a bushel basket. He writes:

In this text, Jesus is coming to us to ask, how might we be the ones holding on tightly to the bushel basket over our heads? **Where are the places we've allowed our lights to be dimmed?** The problem with clinging so tightly to our own bushel baskets is that it means we cannot see the light of others nor can we be a point of light for someone who is sitting in darkness. Without light, how can darkness know it can be illuminated?

Alex goes on to challenge those of us who are part of the More Light Presbyterian network and movement to "**help hoist the bushel basket off of our own congregations and our denomination.**" There has indeed been much progress within our denomination in the past three years, including extending marriage equality to all.

If all this sounds a bit overwhelming, I want to emphasize that we do not have to be salt and light alone, but should take advantage of those opportunities when we can join with others who are doing the same. As one of the growing number of progressive congregations in Tulsa, we are doing that now more than ever with other progressive churches.

Finally, **we are to share that light with a hurting world, the scriptures tell us, how? Through our good works.** After all, faith without works is dead, to quote the Book of James. And it is important to remember **why we do good works. It must not be out of a sense of self-serving pride in order to boost our own status in the community.** That is why Jesus declares, "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and **give glory to God in heaven.**"

So in order for our light to be seen and have any effect, we must be **willing to go where the darkness exits – whether it be out in the world or within ourselves –** to engage and walk through it, so that in time, the light can overcome it. We must claim our identity and mission by being and doing what we already are!

- We are salt: enhancing, spicing up, and adding flavor to life.
- We are light: illuminating the darkness in and through our good works.

Stay salty! Be a light! Be who you are! And to God be the glory.

Amen.

Resource: *Feasting on the Word*