

Salty Christianity

“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.”

Matt. 5:13, 14

Matthew 5:13-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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There is a old saying, especially popular back in my parent's day and before, that folks would use in reference to persons of good solid character. It was a great compliment to say about another, “that person is the salt of the earth.” It's an interesting saying that can be traced back to biblical days. Jesus used it when talking about faithful discipleship. Jesus declared to a large following of disciples, as part of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, “**You are the salt of the earth.**” But what do you suppose Jesus meant when he used this metaphor?

Let's take an important 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 Christianity, 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. By its very nature, **Christianity is about authentic relationships in community.** The Scriptures 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. Jesus doesn't say that as disciples, “You are *to become* the salt of the earth,” as in something we have to work at in order to achieve. Instead, Jesus emphatically declares, “You *are* the salt of the earth.” Jesus didn't challenge them, nor us, to try harder to be 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 followers of Jesus in the fullness of what that means.**

What, then, is the meaning behind the metaphor and imagery of being like salt? Well, **what is the function of salt?** Even more so than today, salt had many different connotations in both ancient Judaism and in Matthew's tradition and context. They include issues of sacrifice, loyalty, purity and covenant. And in addition to functioning as a preservative, its most obvious quality is as **a seasoning to enhance and add flavor to food.** On this last point, biblical commentator William Barclay writes, “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." In other words, **salt serves a purpose, it has a function. When it no longer functions or serves that purpose, it becomes useless.** What Jesus is saying about faithful discipleship, then, is that we, as a community of faith, are charged with a mission to the world. Therefore, he offers a warning that if we, as disciples, deny or fail to engage in our mission, as modeled by Jesus, then we, too, are in a way useless.

The message to you and me as disciples, then, is simple: stay salty! We must continue to strive, by God's grace, to fulfill our mission as a Christian community. You know, I am proud of this congregation. For by our witness over the decades, **College Hill is known throughout Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, and in many parts of Tulsa, as a "salty" church, so to speak. And that's a good thing.** We exist in order to build community and engage in mission. This is not to say that there isn't an inward and internal personal dimension to discipleship, but rather a way to emphasize and highlight the importance of our discipleship through its outward and external dimensions.

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus continues with another metaphor, saying that we are the **light of the world.** The image of light is primary during this church season of Epiphany. 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 purpose of a lamp is to provide light in dark places, not to be hid under a bushel basket where it does no good.**

In an email sent out from the national office of More Light Presbyterians earlier this week, new Executive Director, Alex Patchin McNeill (who is following in the sizable footsteps of former executive director and friend of College Hill, Michael Adee), 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 movement to **help hoist the bushel basket off of our own congregations and our denomination.**

I think that is a nice way to summarize my own personal motivation to join with 26 other religious leaders throughout the Tulsa area last Wednesday evening at All Souls Unitarian Church. We gathered in support of lending our religious voice to support the efforts of **marriage equality in Oklahoma.** It was my way of being a bit salty, which now that I think of it, can also add quite a bit of discomfort to an open wound, which this subject has become. It was also my way to shed a bit more light in what I consider the darkness that surrounds this issue. It also reminded me 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.

We are called to be like a city on a hill whose authentic life and relationships cannot be concealed. For when we are fulfilling our mission in this community and beyond, there's nothing that can hide us.

We are indeed acting as a lighthouse every time we allow God's light of peace, justice and love to shine through us, and to be reflected off us. And we share that light with a hurting world, the scriptures tell us, through our good works. We do this not out of a sense of self-serving pride to boost our own status in the community, but as a way to glorify God by simply doing what we are created to do.

Throughout this year ahead, then, may we here at College Hill concentrate this year not in seeking the status quo, but in reasserting our presence, our very selves, into the surrounding community and world around us. We must also remember that **in order for our light to be seen and have any effect, we must be willing to go where the darkness exits, to engage and walk through it, so that in time, the light can overcome it.**

In doing so, let us 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.**

And to God be the glory.

Amen.

Resources:
Feasting on the Word