

Spice & Shine!

“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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Last Sunday we looked at the first 12 verses of Matthew 5, known as the Beatitudes, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. You may remember that the point was not that these pronouncements were instructions about how to obtain and keep God's blessing, but rather that God's blessing is already upon us, especially upon those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, and who are persecuted for seeking justice. We learned that contrary to society's understanding, God's favor is bestowed upon those whom our culture regards as the one's left behind, the outcasts, and the vulnerable – the ones society thinks are not blessed. I mentioned at the end of that sermon it was important to know that **God's unearned blessing comes first, then comes Jesus' instructions for right living.** That pivot takes place in the verses that follow the Beatitudes, our Gospel reading for this morning.

Let me introduce this by mentioning there is an old saying, especially popular back in my parent's day and before, used in reference to persons who were honest, well-grounded, forthright, trustworthy, and of good solid moral character. It was quite a compliment to say about another, “that person is the salt of the earth.” Let me ask you, Who are the persons in your life, or who you know, that fit this description? It's an interesting saying that can be traced back to biblical days. Jesus used it in reference to our identity and purpose. Jesus declares to a large following of disciples, “**You are the salt of the earth.**” He followed that up with another declaration, “**You are the light of the world**” (Matt. 5:13).

It's as if we're being taught that God has made us, and blessed us, and then gave us a particular purpose in life. What purpose? A biblical commentary known as SALT, writes, “First, **even in very small quantities, salt and light can make a big difference to a much larger whole.** A pinch of salt brings a dish's flavor alive – indeed, salt is one of the only spices that can enhance and bring out *other* flavors in a dish [of food]. And even a little bit of light – say, a single candle – can light up a room. It can [dispel shadows and] even light up a landscape: a candle is visible from [nearly a mile and a half] away.

“Second, both salt and light have simple, elemental purposes. As a seasoning, salt is, well, salty. No-one would use salt that's “lost its taste” (Mt. 5:13). **Salt is for saltiness; its identity and its purpose are virtually one and the same. Likewise, light is for shining. No-one lights a lamp and then hides it out of sight!**”

So, what is Jesus trying to tell us as followers of his ways and teachings? “**In the same way, your and my identity and purpose - who we are and what we're meant to do - are virtually one and the same. Like salt and light, God made us as a small thing that can make a big difference for a larger whole.** God made you and me to spice things up - not to overpower the dish, but to enliven it, enhancing and highlighting its

other flavors. And God made you and me to shine, as only you and I can: a flame that can light up an entire room, or help dispel shadows, or guide a lost traveler home. Jesus isn't giving his listeners a new role to play here; rather, he's naming who we already are. **We don't have to work to become salt and light. [We already ARE salt and light.]** God made us this way, blessing us with gifts for blessing the world. **But we do have to claim, embrace, embody, fulfill, and live out what our gifts make possible. We do have to actually be salty and luminous. We do have to be who we are."**

I'd venture to guess that College Hill is known for being a fairly "salty" church, it certainly is within Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery. Yes, we have a history of spicing things up. And we are all aware that we are "More Light." So, go and bless! And Jesus, in the continuation of his sermon, will go on to provide some instructions (which we will begin to look at next Sunday) for how best to do that. Yet, let me say it again, **"Jesus' sermon is designed to make clear that good works - including the actions he will now recommend in the rest of the sermon and beyond - are not strategies for earning or acquiring blessings. On the contrary, they are tangible ways to respond to our blessedness in gratitude and confidence.**

"But before turning to specific instructions, Jesus adds one more introductory note [that was also part of this morning's Gospel reading]: Some of the teachings to come, he says, may at first sound rather different than what you've heard in the law [- as in the laws of Moses from the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament]. Jesus' message is: "But don't worry: if you follow my instructions, you'll more fully embody the essential features of what Moses taught, "filling out" and exemplifying the law's meaning, spirit, and substance. Do you see? I'm not about abolishing or changing the law! I'm about getting to the heart of the law, and fully living it out ([Mt 5:17-20](#)). The basic idea here is by no means new: [The Old Testament prophet] Isaiah, too, along with many other prophets, pointed out centuries before Jesus that it's quite possible to adhere to the superficial "letter" of a law while at the same time violating its inner heart or "spirit." Religious practices are permanently vulnerable to this kind of hypocrisy, since ostensibly identical actions can be carried out via drastically different motivations. For example, Christians may pray earnestly for our neighbors, even as we demonstrate our contempt for them: Dear God, help them become more like us... Here's the Bottom line: **superficially following the law isn't enough. What really counts is to "fulfill" the law, [bring it to life.] embody its meaning, spirit, and substance - and doing so may well take surprising forms."**

Returning once more to our God-given identity and purpose, let us also be reminded of the warnings Jesus includes in his teaching. He tells us that if salt has lost its taste "it is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot" (Matt. 3:13). Likewise, as light of the world, a city built on a hill that cannot be hidden, no one puts a lit lamp under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand. That way, our light shines before others, so that they may see our good words and give glory to God.

Alex Patchin McNeill is the executive director of the **More Light Presbyterians** network, a pioneering organization going back to 1968, which has worked continuously for the full equality of the LGBTQ community in the life and ministry of our denomination. College Hill joined this network of inclusive congregations in 2001, after a couple of years studying the issues and implications involved. He sent out an email a few years ago reflecting on this scripture passage from Matthew 5. Alex, you may be interested to know, is a female-to-male transgender person. He 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 to help hoist the bushel basket off of our own congregations and our denomination. This has been a primary task of College Hill within our presbytery for nearly 20 years now. This should also remind us 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 also doing good works in a like manner. For example, **our work within the progressive and Interfaith communities here in Tulsa is a very important part of our collective ministry.** And Fellowship Congregational Church (UCC) on Harvard Ave. has certainly become a sister church in this regard. For 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. **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 (as individuals and as a community of faith) **concentrate on reasserting our presence, our very selves, our identity and purpose, into the surrounding communities 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.** Therefore, a bit of risk may be involved.

In doing so, **let us claim our identity and purpose – our mission and ministry – 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.**

I'll leave you with this. **Spice and shine, my friends!** And to God be the glory.

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Word

SALT, *Salt and Light: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany 5, Feb. 3, 2020*