

“Doing the Right Thing with Salt and Light”

Part 2 – Series on the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5: 13—20, Psalm 119: 1-8

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Last week we looked at the Beatitudes. There is some really bad theology on the Beatitudes. I think of one book in particular called *The Be Happy Attitudes*. As if Jesus was talking to individuals to help them be successful, calm, stress free and to lose weight. Jesus’ first sermon is not about helping people adjust to life with a happy attitude.

For Jesus, faith is a way of living and a way of being based on meekness, lament, and a passion for justice, willingness to suffer for what is right, and integrity to the Kingdom of God. It is not about adjusting to the world, but changing the world based on the alternative values of the kingdom. Blessed are those who live this way now, congratulations, even though it seems foolish; they will be vindicated.

To understand the gospel of Matthew, it is helpful to know that he speaks of Jesus in ways that evoke memories of Moses. Both Moses and Jesus are:

Conceived in miraculous way;
threatened at birth by a wicked king;
initially rejected by their own people;
both come out of Egypt;
both pass through water;
both are tested in the wilderness;
and both do 10 great deeds of power in liberating the people of God.

Finally, both Jesus and Moses go up the Mountain. Which is not about a place, but about a revelation. Jesus does not reject the Law of Moses: in more ways, he intensifies it. As if to say: look for the beating heart behind the law.

Look for what God is trying to communicate through the law. For all their similarities, Jesus brings something qualitatively new.

What Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount has an indirect ethical imperative in the form of a call to decision. They do not lay down demands. Instead they lay out the marks of the church. The Sermon on the Mount is a call to creative imagination.

You are the salt of the earth,
you are the light of the world,
you are a city on a hill.

The purpose of light is not to look at the light. The purpose is to illuminate what is around it. The purpose of the church is to show people what is real through the love of God.

On the mountain top, Jesus is not speaking to individuals, but to a crowd. We ought to translate these verses, as Southerners might put it, God has illuminated y'all, now y'all's call is to illuminate the world. Show the world what is real. Let your light shine and let the world know what really matters, which is to say: to let the world know of God's abiding, present, transformative love. Y'all together: together you are the light of the world.

This is not about a passive attitude, but positive actions of Christological importance. Salt does not exist for itself: it has to be mixed. You are blessed for the purpose of becoming agents of preparation and transformation. Y'all are the salt of the world.

We have a saying about good hearted-people: "He's the salt of the earth." That saying has connotations of a small town guy doing small things in his small corner of the world. Hearing that phrase conjures up images: Andy Griffith, Papa Walton. Just plain nice people. Doing nice things. OK, I don't want to discount Andy Griffith or Papa Walton. But what Jesus is talking about means something so much more. You are not just the salt of the earth for the local community, people around you, you are the salt of the earth: THE WHOLE EARTH. Think bigger.

Some language is what they call performative language: it does not merely describe, it brings it into being. Some things bring into being the reality they declare:

The judge pronounces sentence, and it is reality.

When the minister pronounces: I now pronounce you husband and wife.

When the umpire says, "Strike one."

The other person says, "I apologize." and it's real.

The Sermon on the Mount is like that: Y'all are the salt of the world, the light of all the earth. What does salt do? How does it function? This is an evocative term. It evokes multiple layers of meaning, and multiple connotations.

I got a new cookbook last Christmas! It is a scientist's version of a cook book. The author does science experiments with the various recipes. Science based cooking. Get rid of hand-me-down ideas that are not based in fact. What I've come to see is that salt functions in different ways. This book gave me a whole new appreciation for salt.

You are the salt of the whole world:

1. Sometimes, you use salt for cleansing. Salt cleanses sometimes, not all the time, sometimes. Maybe Jesus is calling us to stop being Andy Griffith nice and be the salt of the earth: which is to say, abrasive, cleansing. Not violent, not vicious, just abrasive enough to peel off the slime when the world gets slimy. You are the salt of the earth.

2. Salt is a Preservative. It keeps food from going bad. As the salt of the world, your job is to preserve. You keep things from going bad.

One of 6 major goals of PCUSA is to preserve truth. The problem is: we have all these bots out there, millions of them, giving out propaganda on the web. (There was an article in Atlantic this week about such propaganda that is truly terrifying for democracy.) These bots on the internet set about twisting and distorting the truth.

What can one person do? Not much. Not as one grain of salt. But together with some others, what is possible?

I have a friend, a Presbyterian minister doing a new project. He will take one youth group from one socio-economic group and put them together with a youth group from another socio-economic very different social group. In many ways, quite opposites on the social spectrum. These 2 groups will get together and talk about what matters, what is true. Discern a sense of the truth. He will involve multiple youth groups doing this, then get them all together to see what they can agree is true. He will do this in a number of cities. Then get them all together, and see what they can agree on is true.

Then set them out on the internet to stand up against the propaganda to help stand up for the truth.

I am fascinated by this project because I hear these few youth groups as being the salt of the earth. Maybe the youth of the churches, mosques and synagogues can help us preserve a sense of truth.

3. Salt Makes things taste better. Brings out the vitality. Improves flavor. Makes life more interesting, more dynamic. Your call as Christians is to make life spicier. The job of the church is to make life livelier. To celebrate life in God's good creation.
4. You are the salt of the earth: salt tenderizes. It loosens up the proteins. Put salt on meat, the meat relaxes. Breaks down the barriers in between the cells of the meat.

Do you want your scrambled eggs fluffier? Put salt in 15 minutes before. 15 minutes: not magic: takes time. Salt dissolves the proteins. They relax. Soften up. When they cook, they bind together in a different way, they bind better. It lifts up the eggs.

You are the salt of the earth. Sometimes your calling is to help people relax. Dissolve the barriers. Help people come together in a different ways. Lift people up together.

5. Salt acts as important electrolytes in the body. They help with fluid balance, nerve transmission and muscle function. Your role is to help people keep flowing, moving, keep balanced.

6. In Rabbinic literature of this time period, salt was a metaphor for wisdom.

You are the salt of the earth: to find out what matters.

Saltiness is essential to salt. Salt is pretty much always salty. So the only reason to throw it out is if it becomes mixed with contaminants. It loses its integrity. It can't function as salt: the only thing to do is throw it away. Jesus says: Don't deny your identity, don't mix up your mission trying capture some false hope. Don't lose your function.

Secondly, the church is the light of the world. One lamp can make the whole house livable. One light on a hilltop and guide people for miles around. In other words, what the people of God do in the world really counts. The church may not be able to force its way through, but that is not what the world needs. What the world needs is illumination.

When people get nervous about having the homeless in the neighborhood, the church can lift up a light and help people see the need for a compassionate world. When people get nervous about people of a different skin color or when they are described in terms of otherness, danger, fear and race-baiting, the church can lift up a light that helps people see our interrelatedness.

You are the light of the world. Let your light shine. You are the light of the world. If you are authentic, it will not be concealed. The disciples are to let their light shine to all. They do not generate the light: God is the source of lights. Having received the light, you share it with all. Reminder: shine your light.

The purpose of engaging in their acts of engaged discipleship is not to make people notice them, not to build up their own ego, but to glory God, to point to God.

It's written almost completely in the indicative: THEN IT SWITCHES TO THE IMPERATIVE: BE WHAT YOU ARE. Don't guilt yourself into things, don't push yourself. Don't perfect yourself. Just be yourself. Be what you are.

Stimulate your faithful imagination. The kingdom of God: what is that like? There is a certain wildness in that image. Don't domesticate it. It's radical. You are the light of the world: you have been lit by God. What does it mean to shine? To illuminate what is real. What does it mean to be a city on a hill? It means be seen: guide people by who you are. Be what you are. Salt of the earth. Light. A city that reminds people of the Kingdom of God.

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