

“Salt and Light”

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Matthew 5:13-16

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. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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.

There’s an old story about a rabbi who was wandering through the forest one evening. As he was praying and walking along, he lost his way and found himself in front of a military base, where a guard brought him out of his reverie by shouting, “Who are you? What are you doing here?” The rabbi replied, “How much do they pay you?” “What?,” asked the puzzled guard, surprised at this question. “I asked, how much do they pay you?” “Why do you want to know that?” the guard wondered. “Because,” said the rabbi, “I need someone to ask me those questions every day.”

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” Those *are* really good questions. They *are* the questions that we need to be asked every day. We, as individuals, need those questions asked of us. We, as this part of the body of Christ called First Presbyterian Church of Champaign, need to be asked those questions. And we, as this denomination called PC(USA), need those questions asked of us. Jesus gives one answer to those

questions for us in our gospel reading for this morning. I particularly like the way *The Message* paraphrase starts out this passage with a perfect answer to that question of “What are you doing here?” It goes like this:

¹³“Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. ¹⁴⁻¹⁶Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

Jesus told us that we are here to be salt and light. As *The Message* put it, “salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth.” That’s how salt works. You add a little salt to bring out the flavors of the food. Salt is not really something that is to be consumed by itself, though I have trouble convincing my children of that sometimes. You add it to something else to enhance, or bring out the flavor. That’s our role in this world. We are to be added to the events and circumstances of this world, stirred into life as people know it, and then we bring out the God-flavors. We might think of ourselves as salt-shakers, moving through this world, adding the flavor of God’s kingdom wherever it is most needed. So many in the world today need a taste of the kingdom of God, and we can provide that. We can sprinkle a little salt on their lives, enhancing the flavor of what they are experiencing. We can help bring about the kingdom of God in the lives of everyone we encounter. The truth about salt, though, is that it is *not* just for flavoring -- it is essential.

Our bodies *must* have salt to live. Salt is now an inexpensive item, but in centuries past, it was prized and empires became rich mining it. Today, we put it in tiny packets thrown into bottom of fast-food bags, but in Jesus' day, salt was something precious. I think we should consider the valuable aspect of salt as part of what Jesus was saying about us. We are of great value, and God uses each of us to accomplish the goals of the kingdom. And that "we" isn't just those who are gathered here today. It isn't just those who are members of this church or this denomination or those who are showing up to worship somewhere today. As you may remember from when we discussed the Beatitudes a couple of weeks ago, Jesus was addressing those who were not the important, honored members of society, and he said that *they* had great value. Yes, each of us here has great value, but so does every other child of God. Just as we are to go about bringing out the God-flavors of the world, so should we seek to taste the God-flavors that others are bringing out.

Then Jesus went on to say that we are light. He said that we aren't to light a lamp and place it under a bushel basket. And here, my mind goes to the children's song that I remember singing with such joy when growing up in my church in Tennessee. It is a fun song to sing: "This little light of mine. I'm gonna let it shine" but the best part is "Hide it under a bushel, **NO!** I'm gonna let it shine." For a child, it's fun to get to shout out at church, "**NO!** I'm gonna let it shine." That's what Jesus said we are to do. We are to let our light shine. Light is like salt. It's not an uncommon thing. It's not something exotic. It's not like Jesus said we are some strange element on the periodic table that we don't even understand what it is. As a child, I had a friend who had lived part of his life on a military base in Germany. He and I were excited when we found the element *Germanium*, named for the discover's home country of Germany. And then there's *Krypton*, fun for Superman

fans. Another fun one is *Unununium* - that's spelled u-n-u-n-u-n-i-u-m. Fun stuff, but I have absolutely no clue what any of those elements are or look like or how they function. I'm sure some in this congregation do, but not most of us. But *all* of us know what salt and light are like. Jesus says we are these simple things – salt and light. Like salt, light is crucial for life. Without light, nothing grows and we have nothing to eat. Without light, there can be no life at all. Jesus said that we are light. Our role is to spread that light to a world so often in darkness. We are not to hide the light, but instead to let it shine before others. We reflect the mission of Jesus himself which we find in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” We reflect the light of Christ into the world we inhabit, in all of our actions. We can be good reflectors of that light or we can reflect it poorly. It is our choice, but we don't have a choice to not reflect it at all.

Jesus said that we *are* salt and light. Notice that he didn't say that we should *strive to be* salt and light. He didn't say that, if we worked at it, we'd be salt and light. He said that we *are* salt and light. We have a role to play in this world. Salt and light are amazing things, really. You can't put salt in one part of a pot of soup. It's going to get mixed in everywhere. And, as John reminds us, light cannot be overtaken by darkness. If you are in a room at night with a light on and you open the door to the hallway, the room does not get darker, but the hallway gets brighter. Only in the imagination of Dr. Seuss and his “flash-dark” can you shine darkness. In reality, light overcomes darkness. Martin Luther King, Jr. told us about that, too. He said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Salt and light are pervasive. They

overcome. They permeate. And Jesus said that's what we are – salt and light. “Who are you? What are you doing here?” We are salt and we are light, and we are infiltrating the world.

There are countless ways that we can be salt and light in this world. We can spread the flavor and light of God's love in all of our encounters. Not all of us are called to be preachers. Not all of us are called to be missionaries. Not all of us are called to be teachers. Not all of us are called to be evangelists. But we are all called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. All of us can spread the love of God to those we meet, everyday, by reminding them that they *too* are salt and light.

I heard about an incident where a couple was driving back from a bicycle event they had gone to in Arizona and thought they could make it to North Dakota. Instead, they were suddenly, and without warning, trapped in a blizzard. They couldn't see anything and finally had to pull over and stop by the side of the road. They thought they were prepared for everything, but as they ran out of gas and were starting to get cold, they were quite worried. At some point, a trucker also pulled over, concerned about the snow drifts and afraid that he might rear-end someone. As he looked around the road, he saw a little light flickering. It was the light in the car of the couple, part of their “winter survival kit.”

There it was – the light. A *literal* light which drew attention to the couple. But the more important light was the truck driver. *He* was the salt and light in this story. He saw the little light, put on his snow suit, got out of his truck and went to the stranded car where the couple was shivering and desperate. He invited them to stay in his warm truck, where

he gave them coffee and a place to sleep. He literally saved their lives. He was salt and light for them.

But he had to *get out of his truck* to do that. Jesus said to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” Salt has many roles: flavor, preservation, healing. Light has many roles: illumination, energy, warmth. But *none* of those can be done if the salt is kept in the salt shaker and the light is kept under a basket. You have to *get out of the truck* and make your way to the ones in need. You have to step out into the world that God loves and show that love, shine that light. Hide it under a bushel? **NO!**

That is what this church was started to do over 165 years ago. The faithful people who started this church knew that they were salt to bring out the God-flavors of the earth. They were light to bring out the God-colors in the world. They didn’t keep God a secret. They knew that they were a city on a hill. They knew the answer to the question, “What are you doing here?” It is a question that we should continue to ask ourselves as we seek to discern God’s will for this church in a time of transition. *We should* spend time in prayer and study, examining the word of God. *We should* spend time in worship and praise. *We should* spend time in fellowship with one another. But we also *must* be salt and light in the world. So, take your salt-shaker with you and bring out the flavors of God in the world. Bring your flashlight with you and illuminate the world as you go. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Live accordingly. Amen.