

You Are the Salt of the Earth, the Light of the World
Matthew 5: 13-20

Dave Bianchin
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

I love the Sermon on the Mount because of its directness but it makes me nervous. Jesus tells us to do some things that are really pretty remarkable. If you look at the beatitudes that precede this chapter, there are all kinds of what we would call the great reversals in God's kingdom. It's not all about obtaining power and influence and education and wealth in order to fulfill God's kingdom. It's about following God through the different paths of life that sometimes lead us in the reverse of what society stands for. Then we get to this particular passage which bridges the time between the beatitudes and Jesus' teaching on how the law is being redefined. He gives us two focused images for what it means to be Christ's people in the world – the image of salt and the image of light.

The central theme in this is that as perplexing and challenging as the Sermon on the Mount can be, the will of God is a serious matter. It is not to be taken lightly. Our lives are to make an impact on the entire world. Often times we retreat into the idea that I hope the power of God is enough just to change me.

But God's vision is far greater than that. God does desire to change us, to change us in order that the world may know God's love and grace. Our lives are meant to make an impact. The temptation to think about, "How do I work this out on my own?" This is really not a temptation that we are to give in to. Jesus says, "Think about how my life in you translates into the gospel in the world.

Two of the things I want to point out linguistically about both of these statements are where Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world." He uses the word you collectively, as a plural. He is talking to the disciples and he is talking to us. While there are individual aspects of living this out, we are called to work this out together. How do we, as a church, embody salt and light to the world around us?

Each of us, moving towards this individually, will contribute to that but when it says in Hebrews that we are to spur one another on to love and good deeds, that is kind of what is going on here. We, together, are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

The second linguistic thing I'd like to point out is that Jesus doesn't say, "You really ought to try hard so that you can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He says, "You are." This is the present state of Christians. We are salt and we are light.

Let's look at the two images. Salt was a necessity in biblical times. It was used in sacrifices in the temple. It was the only way to preserve food. It was used on burnt offerings. In biblical times, the salt was usually procured from around the Dead Sea. Because of its proximity to the Dead Sea, this image of salt is sometimes viewed as desolation. But Jesus is connecting the life-giving and life-preserving qualities of salt to our discipleship. He emphasizes the preservative nature.

The main benefit of preserving, though, makes it dangerous when it fails. If we go to eat an article of food that we think was preserved and it was corrupted, what is going to happen? We are going to get sick. We could even die from that. If it is not properly preserved, it has a negative effect in the world around us and in us. We are warned in this passage, not to lose our saltiness which is God's intended purpose for our lives. We, as Christians, are called to live obediently because as we do, we will have a preserving effect on the society around us.

Without going into individual opinions about what is going on in the world right now, one can say generally and forcefully that what is happening right now is not preserving the will of God or embodying the tenets of the kingdom of God. We, as Christians, are called to live out the fruit of the spirit ... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. I don't see that very often in the world around us so if something is going to change in that respect, you and I need to be the people to lead the way and embody that in our love for people. We need to encourage peacefulness, to be patient and kind to those around us.

In that saltiness, we will hold up the high value of human life. We will hold up the sustaining of the human order by the will, grace, love and mercy of God. Our presence as Christians can have a godly and humanizing effect in all of the awful things that are happening in the world around us. As people are getting trampled in a number of ways, we can be the bridge between God's goodness and preserving life for people around us. When we take our stand for Christ, we make the world less fertile ground for ungodly influences. Remember, do not despair of our ability to make a difference. Jesus doesn't illustrate strength; he illustrates presence. He says, "You be there. You show up. You be the one who stands for godly principles."

Let's look to Jesus' life for a moment in Colossians 1, this is how Paul describes Christ's presence and preserving influence in the world. Beginning in verse 15, "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, for by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. Whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things and in him all things hold together and he is the head of the body, the church." So the preserving influence of Jesus is to hold us together in the midst of the radical sinfulness of the world around us. Holding us together gives us strength to be Christ's presence in the world around us. We are invited to show up and to be that presence in the world around us.

Many years ago, a magazine carried a series of pictures that graphically illustrated a tragic story. The first picture was of a vast wheat field in western Kansas. The second showed a distressed mother sitting in a farm house in the center of the field of wheat. The story explained that her 4 year old son had wandered away from the house and the field and had not come back. The mother and father looked all day and could not find him. The third picture shows dozens of friends and neighbors who had heard of this and had joined hands to make a long, human chain through the field. The final picture was the heartbroken father holding his lifeless son who had been found too late, who died of exposure. The caption under it read, "O God, if we had only joined hands sooner."

Friends, as we join hands to be Christ's salt and light in the world, this makes a difference – a life or death difference – in people's attitudes and relationships with God and others.

Jesus says also, "You are the light of the world." Light in Genesis was created even before the heavens and the earth; it is one of the primary signs and symbols of divine activity in scripture and, apart from divine light, the world stands in darkness. In the New Testament, Christ says that light is a gift to us. We are the light of the world because we have been cleansed and transformed by the power of the heavenly light in order to become the light of the world to those around us.

As with the image of salt, there is both a promise and a warning that comes with this. We need to go to the source of light who is Jesus Christ to find our way and to help others find their way as well. God wants us to live in this light because it benefits all. It is not something that we impose upon people. It is not something we force down their throats. It is in living in the light and the love and the mercy and grace of Christ that becomes a compelling thing for those who are sitting in darkness. Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." And so we come to him because he shines that light so brightly around us. We need to receive that in our lives.

It actually became a promise in Paul's ministry when he said, "The Lord commanded us saying, 'I have made you a light to the Gentiles so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" We are bearers of that light to those around us, for people to see the love of Christ.

I was thinking about the campouts that were mentioned this morning by the Boy and Girl Scouts. I love to be outside and I love to camp. One of the neat things about being way out in the middle of nowhere is that the darkness is really dark. We are not used to that around here. There is a street light or other light around us, but we don't appreciate the extent to which darkness can really be dark because we are not used to it. There are people who are living in hopelessness. There are people who are living in rejection and in pain. The world has lost its bearings to God and doesn't know what to do about it. For

us, as we shine that light, in the mercy and love and grace of Christ, we let God's light shine into the world.

Several centuries ago, there was an Evangelical Revival in England. People reflecting upon that time said that, in many ways, it might have saved England as a country. Two of the things that came out of that time were the formation of the Salvation Army and how many people have been helped – fed, clothed, ministered to – because of the work of the Salvation Army through the years.

Also during that time, the great statesman, William Wilberforce, worked tirelessly for decades to abolish slavery in the British Empire and he succeeded. That light shining in that dark time, through the lives of Christians, had huge ongoing benefit for people in the world. We may not be Wilberforce but Wilberforce was supported by others. As we stand for and understand and advocate for godly things in the world, we are the light of the world as well. This is an opportunity for us. It is also a danger – a danger that we would forfeit that opportunity. We do not have to dump salt on people to season their lives. We do not have to flash a light in their eyes, blinding them, in order to shine light for the world. As we live the abundant life, as we share the joy of Christ, as we help others along the way, as we are faithful and our lives light the way around us.

Harry Lauder was a Scottish comedian many years ago. He liked to describe the old lamplighter who came to his boyhood home each evening, lighting the gas lamps that lit up the streets. The lamplighter would light a lamp in front of Lauder's home then make his way across the street to the next one and go back and forth. Eventually, in the evening twilight, Lauder would lose sight of the old lamplighter. He said this, "I always knew where he was by the avenue of light he left behind him."

Friends, that is God's invitation to us – to receive God's love and mercy and grace and the power of the Spirit; to be that preserving salt and seasoning in the world around us; to shine the light of Christ in all Christ's grace and mercy and love; beginning here and in our neighborhoods and in our homes, where we work and wherever God leads us – in the lives that we are called to.

Please pray with me. Lord, we are grateful that you have shined light in our lives. We are grateful, Lord, that the light does not come from us because our light is often dim. Yours is bright and warm and brings growth and beauty to the world. May we receive that and may it shine through us. We pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.