

Matthew 5:13-20

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

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

THE SALT LIFE

You see the bumper sticker everywhere in Central Florida. It reads simply, “The Salt Life.” My inquiring mind had to know. What is The Salt Life and how do I get it?

I turned to the oracle of all knowledge (Google) and found the rest of the story. It seems that an irrigation contractor and a framing contractor in Jacksonville shared a common love for the ocean. So, they both got a tattoo on their neck. It read: “The Salt Life.”

That tattoo and their love for salt-water sports gave them an idea for a business. They would launch a clothing line based upon the tattoos on their

bodies. One of the guys put it this way, “We had the tattoos, then we got some stickers, and it just took off from there.”

And so now you know. The Salt Life is a commercial venture based upon the fact that some people are crazy about the ocean.

I was frankly disappointed. I was hoping it was about something else. I was hoping it referred to something Jesus once said to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth.”

Christians are called to live the Salt Life. We are to live a life based upon the life and teachings of Jesus.

Suppose Christians today decided to take Jesus’ admonition seriously.

What would it mean to be the salt of the earth? What would it mean to live the Salt Life?

For some living the Salt Life seems almost impossible. Martin Luther said that the strict moral teachings of Jesus were meant to drive us to despair. In this way we would be forced to acknowledge our sin and rely only upon the grace of God for salvation.

Others took a different approach.

They suggested that only special people could live the kind of life suggested by Jesus.

Monks and ascetics who lived apart from the world could live as Jesus suggested, and then they could pray for the rest of us poor souls who didn’t have a chance of doing what Jesus required.

YOU ARE SALT AND LIGHT

But, I think that our lesson for today does not allow for either interpretation. The Salt Life cannot be lived apart from the ocean, and living The Salt Life for Jesus cannot be lived apart from the world. Notice that in our lesson for today Jesus tells his disciples, “You are the salt *of the earth*.”

In other words this is not a life achieved by praying professionals living apart from the world. The Salt Life is to be lived in the world. More than that, the disciples had already attained The Salt Life. The verb is present tense. Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth.”

Now don’t misunderstand. There are certainly ethical demands in this passage, and we’re going to get to those in a minute. The call of Jesus is a call to righteousness and justice.

And yet, that call begins with a promise. The call of Jesus begins with an affirmation. Jesus tells the disciples, “You are the salt of the earth.”

He doesn’t say, “You can be the salt of the earth.” He doesn’t say, “If you work hard enough, you will be the salt of the earth.” No, he says, “You are the salt of the earth.”

Using another metaphor Jesus tells his disciples that they are “the light of the world.” Again notice the use of the present tense. Jesus doesn’t say you can be the light of the world or that you should be the light of the world. Jesus tells the disciples, “You are the light of the world.”

When the disciples tell the Good News about God’s love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, they are reflecting the very light of God. They are the light of the world.

Light is like salt in that it is so common and yet a little bit can make a huge difference.

In a Good Friday service the lights were extinguished in a very large Gothic style church. Through they sat in darkness for just a few moments to the congregation it seemed like an eternity.

Finally, one candle is lit, just one in that huge building. But, that one candle made a dramatic difference. People were able to see each other’s faces again. The whole room felt warmer because of that one small candle.

I was foolish enough to go caving with a minister friend when I was in Virginia. To demonstrate how dark a cave can be he had us switch off our miner style hats just for a moment. The darkness was terrifying.

He said, “In a cave, light is life. That’s why I carry at least three different sources of light every time I go exploring.” I was ever so glad when we turned our lights back on. Just a little light made a huge difference in my world at that point.

These are metaphors that Jesus used to describe his disciples. He didn’t say that his disciples would be soldiers, a mighty army marching into the world. He didn’t say that his disciples would be in charge or have a life free from trouble.

Instead, he said that we are salt and light, little things that make a big difference.

The harvest moon is very bright because it reflects the light of the sun. In the same way when disciples reflect the light of Jesus, even that reflected light can brighten up a dark world.

Jesus says that his disciples are like a city built on a hill. You can’t hide. He says that trying to hide the light of God’s salvation is as crazy as putting a candle under a bushel basket. What good does that do?

WHAT IS THE SALT LIFE?

But, we’re still left with our original question. What does this mean? How can disciples live the Salt Life? How can disciples shine in a dark world?

I think the answer is provided by the verses that precede our lesson for today, the section we call the Beatitudes. Jesus pronounced a blessing upon certain groups of people. He said things like:

Blessed are the poor in spirit.
Blessed are the pure in heart.
Blessed are those who mourn.

Blessed are the meek.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
Blessed are the peacemakers.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

One commentator said that the Beatitudes are Jesus' self-portrait. The Beatitudes portray one blessed of God and one who lives a life of blessing in the world. Through the Beatitudes Jesus portrays a new way of life, and Jesus invites us to live it with him.

Now neither Jesus nor the people who follow him are blessed by circumstances. And God did not promise to take them out of their difficult situation.

Instead they were blessed by the fact that God was with them in their struggle. God promised to lift them up in their time of need. God gave them a new identity, a new name. They would be called the children of God.

And so, in the Kingdom of God those who mourned would be comforted. The often-reviled peacemakers would be called the children of God. The merciful would receive mercy. The persecuted would come to know God's kingdom in a deeper way.

In other words, the people who are struggling to make it and make things better in a difficult and dangerous world are not alone. God is with and for them. This is the gospel. This is the good news.

And this is the message that the disciples of Jesus are called to preach in the world. When they preached this message in word and deed they would be the salt of the earth. They would be adding flavor, God's flavor to the world.

A LITTLE BIT OF SALT AND LIGHT GOES A LONG WAY

Have you ever noticed how just a little bit of salt can make a big difference in how a dish tastes? I ate lunch with some church members one day at the nursing home cafeteria. I didn't know until I took the first bite that everyone was on a salt free diet. It tasted horrible!

The cooks saw my expression and quickly brought me some salt to put on my food. But, it didn't help all that much. The salt had to be there from the beginning in order to make the food taste good. But, if you cook with just a little bit of salt, it makes the whole dish taste different.

And that's what Jesus is saying. Unless the disciples of Jesus bring good news to the people of the world who are struggling, we are not doing our job. We are not serving our purpose.

Living the Salt Life means bringing the message of God's compassion to those who are broken by life. Living the Salt Life means bringing God's promise of peace and justice to a world that seems bent on self-destruction.

We are tempted not to do that because we are so small, and the problems are so big. We certainly cannot solve the problems of the world by our own ingenuity and power. We are weak and sinful creatures.

But, we are not preaching ourselves. We are preaching the Good News of the Kingdom. Just as salt seasons food, we season the world with the hope of God's grace and justice. Just as a candle brings light to a darkened room so the message of God's forgiveness brings light to a dark and dangerous world.

Now when we do this we are not bringing glory to our own lives. The only light we have is reflected light. And so we give God the glory for whatever may be accomplished.

We bring our good deeds, infected as they are with self-interest and mixed motives, and we give them to God. And in God's hands, our words and our works light up the world. Standing on the promises of God, we find the strength to do God's will.

By the way, this is what we refer to in theology as sanctification. Sanctification is doing the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The reason this does not cause us to despair is that we believe that our ability to do those good works is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Just as our salvation is a work of pure grace so our life in Christ is also a work of pure grace.

When we are disciples of Jesus, the law is no longer a source of condemnation but another means of grace. Jesus certainly interpreted God's law and the message of the prophets in a new way. And Jesus was very critical of religious tradition.

But, Jesus was not critical of the law. In this passage he said of the law that not one letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away until all is

accomplished. Grace does not get us out from under the demands of God's law. Grace enables us to fulfill God's law.

CHANGE AND HOPE

I read a very impressive faith statement at a Presbytery meeting this past week. The woman who wrote this statement got into some very bad habits after she left home for college. She did not like herself. In fact she coined a new phrase to describe the theological term total depravity. She said that she was a "hot mess."

She wanted to be different, but she didn't know how. She thought that no one could possibly love her including Jesus. But, then her parents had a conversion experience. They joined a local church, and she began to notice that little by little their behavior was changing. They were becoming different people. It seemed like a miracle.

And her parent's change gave her hope. She wanted what they had.

And not too long after this she accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior. Eventually she even felt called into the ministry, and that's why I was reading her faith statement.

She saw the light because her parents were the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Through what they said and what they did, things changed dramatically in her life.

That's the positive side.

LOSING OUR SALT, HIDING OUR LIGHT

But what happens when the opposite occurs. What happens when people of faith lose their saltiness? What happens when people of faith hide their light under a bushel? What happens when religious leaders abuse their power and cause others to falter?

Depending on which verse you choose, they either take last place in the kingdom (19) or they don't make it into the kingdom at all (20). We could spend much time at this point speculating about who will go to heaven and who won't. That's a fruitless argument because that's God's call, not ours.

But, the more important discussion revolves around this: What is it that causes serious, religious people to do terrible things?

Why did the scribes and Pharisees reject Jesus and persecute him? And why do “good Christian people” sometimes turn their back on Jesus and all that he taught?

Jesus told his disciples that if their righteousness didn’t exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees they wouldn’t make it into the kingdom.

Now we often think about the scribes and the Pharisees in a very stereotypical way. We think about their hypocrisy. In fact when I look up the word, Pharisee in the dictionary one of the definitions of that word is a self-righteous or hypocritical person.

There’s some truth in that definition. Hypocrisy was a part of the problem.

But, I would say that a bigger problem for these religious leaders is that religion got in the way of faith. Jesus said of the religious leaders, “They strain at a gnat but swallow a camel.” (Matthew 23:24) They were blind to their own sinfulness because they had reduced faith to following man made rules.

And yet when it came to following the weightier matters of the law, the command to love God and your neighbor as yourself, they failed. In fact they were even able to use religion to avoid the clear demands of God’s law. Compassion took a back seat to rules and regulations. They laid heavy burdens on the backs of the people in the name of religion.

Please do not think that this is just an ancient problem. There are many today who hide the light of God’s grace under the bushel of rules and regulations. There are many today who lose their saltiness because they become bogged down in form instead of substance. There are many today who lay heavy and unnecessary burdens on people in the name of God.

Jesus said, “The kingdom is not coming in this way. You won’t get into the Kingdom if you keep acting in this way.”

Instead, the kingdom comes when we proclaim the Gospel, the Good News in word and deed.

In the name of Jesus we bless those that society curses. In the name of Jesus we lift up those who have been crushed by life. In the name of Jesus we dare to speak truth to power. And in the name of Jesus we dare to be peacemakers in a world that wants to wage war.

That's The Salt Life.
Buy the bumper sticker if you must.
But, more importantly, live the life.

Remember friends.
You *are* the salt of the earth.
You *are* the light of the world.

Amen.