

Sunday Sermon
February 5, 2017
“Salt and Light”
Matthew 5:13-20

Introduction

Teresa Carpenter shared on Adam Bowling’s and my Facebook pages a quote that congregations should be as excited about church as they are about the Super Bowl game. So if it is a winning worship service, the quote says, the people should pour Gatorade over the pastors’ heads.

I was reminded of another time in another city when a pastor shared about how his congregation was not excited. “They want things to be the way they used to be. But this community is the way it used to be, and I cannot make the church the way it used to be,” he said, frustrated.

Later that same day, I was at a meeting with a staff member at the town’s Chamber of Commerce. “How is it,” I asked her, “that you are always so upbeat? Your attitude is so positive no matter what is happening. You bring light to wherever you go.” “Well, she said, “I have not known this city and community other than how it is now. I am kind of glad I was not here in another time, because I can focus on now and who we are now.”

Matthew wrote his gospel to people who were unexcited, unhappy. They wanted things to be the way they used to be, back when the Maccabees were in control or even further back during the time of the great monarchy with kings David and Solomon. Now they were under Roman occupation, oppressed and worried about their future.

So Matthew shared with his readers about the time when Jesus early in his ministry went up on a mountain with a group of followers, common fishermen, farmers and day-laborers, and he taught them about the kingdom of God. Jesus looked at this discouraged and disheartened group of people and said, “You are the people who will make God’s kingdom a reality. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are the people who can change the world.”

And no doubt they thought: “Really? Who is he kidding? Has he seen the reports about our community, the projections about our future?” Nothing Jesus ever said sounded more ridiculous, more out of touch with reality than this declaration that common, ordinary people would change the world. And yet, he was right; they did.

I

Most Sundays when you come to church, we preachers try to get you to do something. “You ought, you should, you must”—the gospel in the imperative mood.

Ask people why they come, and they say, “I come to hear what I am doing wrong and to be told what I need to do right.”

But Jesus does not talk in the imperative mood here. He talks in the indicative mood: “You are the salt of the earth,” he says to the people on the mountain. Not “You must be” or “You should be” or even “You ought to be” but rather “You **are**. You are the salt of the earth.”

Salt preserves. You preserve the kingdom of God in the world.

Salt sanitizes and aids in healing. You aid in the world’s healing.

Salt can be an agent of temperature transfer. It can add warmth and melts ice. You help warm feelings that have gone cold. You help melt hostility and negativity in the world.

But here is the thing: Jesus says if salt loses its ability to do these things, it is useless. Salt is no good if it loses its saltiness.

Likewise, if we lose the components of our faith, the preserving seasoning of our lives, we are no different from those around us. We blend in rather make a difference in the world.

II

Then Jesus makes another statement. “You are the light of the world.” You are the only light the world has. Hide your light under a basket, and everyone stumbles.

Again, Jesus does not say “You must be” or “You should be” or “You ought to be” but rather “You **are**. You are the light of the world.”

You already have what you need to do what is right and to be righteous. Carry the light into the darkness.

There is a story from the childhood of Robert Louis Stevenson from a time when he was housebound during an extended period of illness. One evening his nurse found him gazing out a window at dusk, watching a lamplighter move down the street, lighting the lamps one by one. When the nurse asked Stevenson what he was doing, he replied, “I am watching a man punch holes in the darkness.”

The light we share may seem small and insignificant. But that very light punches holes in the darkness.

It is not a command from Jesus. It is a pronouncement: You are salt. You cannot help but bring seasoning and healing where you are.

You are light. You cannot help but illuminate where you are.

That is what we are as disciples of Christ and citizens of the kingdom. That is what we bring to the communities in which we live.

That means even the daily things we do, like the way we spend our money, the way we spend our time, the way we treat others, the statements we make, the jokes we tell, are all transformed from being personal matters of our lives to a witness of the Light of the World.

III

They were just common, ordinary people up on that mountain hearing those words from Jesus. But as sociologist of religion Robert Bellah said, “We should not underestimate the significance of a small group of people who have a vision of a just and gentle world. The quality of a culture may be changed when only 2 percent of its people have a new vision.”

This evening, well over one million people will watch over 60 30-second commercials, each costing over 5 million dollars just for the airtime. We will be told what kind of car will make us happy, what kinds of snacks and beverages will satisfy us, what technologies will make our lives better. Yet here Jesus says you already have everything you need to be blessed and everything you need to know about being righteous.

We will watch a celebrity-led half-time show. We will see offense and defense played until the clock runs down, and the team with the most points on the scoreboard is declared the champion. Yet here Jesus shows us a different kind of greatness, a different kind of winner, not one who plays by the rules of the day but rather one who follows the play book for the kingdom of heaven.

In their efforts to be righteous, the scribes and Pharisees focused on rules, interpretations of the law. Jesus says focus on being God’s salt and light in the world, and then you will know true righteousness.

Conclusion

These days I receive emails from friends who ask, “How are things over in Morganton?” And I respond, “Good.”

“I hear some of the industries are gone and the town is not what it used to be,” they comment.

“Things have changed,” I answer, “but Morganton is good.”

“How about the church?” they ask. “How many people are at the church these days?”

And I say, “Enough. Enough to be God’s people and do what God is calling us to do here.”

It only takes a pinch of salt to season an enormous pot of soup.

It only takes a single candle to light an entire room.

We are salt. We bring seasoning and healing where we are.

We are light. We punch holes in the darkness where we are.

That is what we are as disciples of Christ and citizens of his kingdom.

It is indicative; it is who we are.

That is how Jesus said it.