

## February 5, 2017: The Great Invitation: Salt and Light



Last week, we joined Jesus and his disciples at the top of the mountain and listened to hear more about God's kingdom and who God calls blessed. We heard Jesus share that EVERYONE no matter the situations they face, no matter their beliefs or convictions, EVERYONE is called blessed by God – and it is not our job to judge, but simply to love in spite of the differences that usually separate us. This week, we pick up where we left off within the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, listening for Jesus' instructions and guidance. Now his focus begins to shift, from EVERYONE to specifically those seeking to be his followers or disciples. For those dedicated to Jesus' message of radical love, something more is being asked. God is seeking to transform our whole lives for the good of the kingdom, and Jesus uses two metaphors of common everyday things to explain what is being asked from those called.

Jesus says to his followers, you are the Salt of the earth and the light of the world. SALT and LIGHT – what could be more common, or more beneficial in Jesus day?! In our contemporary world, salt is not necessarily seen the same way as it was back then. We think of dietary restrictions on our salt intake for those with high blood pressure or heart disease. We think of potato chips and pretzels. We think of the salt and brine that keeps our roads and sidewalks safe to travel in the winter. In biblical times, salt was overwhelmingly seen as a positive resource. Not only does salt add flavor to food, but it is also used to preserve certain foods such as meat or fish from spoiling (essential before the invention of refrigeration), it helps to purify or cleanse meats through the removal of blood (which was forbidden to be consumed according to the Torah), and salt is useful in healing or cleansing certain ailments. All of these uses were commonly known in Jesus' day. Indeed, such uses were likely the cause for the symbolic use of salt in offerings and sacrifice, and in sealing God's covenant with Israel (Numbers 28:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5). In short, when Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth," he and his audience likely had much more in mind than a convenient flavor source. Salt was a necessary element of life.

And then there is light. While John's Gospel says Jesus is the light of the world, here in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says that his followers are the light of the world. And then goes on to remind them that a light gets set up high to shine throughout the room--not hidden under a basket. In our contemporary world, where light comes easily from the flick of a light switch, we can really only appreciate the full punch of this metaphor when we're stuck somewhere without power – either in a power outage, or camping in the middle of the woods. Light, is easy to come by in the daytime, but once night sets in, light is a gift that not only helps you see, but helps you do everything else! When it was nightfall, in the ancient world, it was DARK! We hear Isaiah say that in darkness, "we grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes" (Isaiah 59:10). As Jesus uses this metaphor, the light is not simply to allow others to see whatever they wish, but it is for others to witness the acts of justice that Jesus' followers perform.

Have you ever heard the saying attributed to the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius, "It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness." There is so much to

complain or worry about in this world: so much evil, confusion, suffering. Darkness. This proverb suggests that we do something about it, rather than just talk. No matter how small the candle we light, no matter how insignificant our positive action feels, it can have an effect. Jesus' saying goes farther. He says we are the light. Do we even begin to realize what a dramatic statement that is? Yes, we light candles. We do things to make the world a brighter place. We make a difference. But we also are the candle. We are the children of God. We are the difference.

As I was reflecting on these metaphors this week, I was struck by the fact that both salt and light are not elements that are useful to themselves. Their value comes in their impact on other things. Just as salt brings out the flavor of the food it is added to, or melts the ice on the road it is tossed on, light functions to allow people to see and to provides energy for plant growth. If Jesus calls us salt and light, which are useful not to themselves but to others, it makes me wonder whether we realize that this is part of our identity as followers of Christ. Do we really understand that this church, this faith does not exist for us as individuals, but for the community as a whole; that our identity as a church is not as a social club or a place of personal piety – benefiting ourselves only, but rather community of personal AND social transformation.

When I imagine salt as a metaphor for Christians I think of that tiny bit of flavoring--a single courageous voice, a community of lively faith--making a huge difference in a much larger entity --- a world full of hatred and division, power struggles and injustice. I imagine light shining hope into the darkest corners of the world. These metaphors remind us that we live and love not just for our own little worlds, our families and friends, but for the whole world that God loves, whether we "like" it or not. Being salt and light for the world means loving the neighbor we have to deal with every day but also caring about the "stranger"--refugees in war-torn countries, children who go to school hungry, teens who are bullied and the bullies as well, those who disagree with us politically, victims of violence and disasters, those caught in poverty and addiction...and the world that surrounds us all, including the good earth that holds us and all of God's beautiful creatures, all of these so vulnerable to our decisions, to our arrogance and our lack of consideration. Last week we were reminded that EVERYONE is blessed... now we're challenged to live like it!

And like most things in this world, it's not all about us! Jesus tells us to "let our light shine before others," to let the good things that we do point the way to God. Rather than hoping that our good acts bring us glory, instead, radiate God's own goodness and love in the world so that others may come to know God's love for themselves. Madeleine L'Engle's approach to evangelism draws on Jesus' own words here: "We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it." Simply by being the light, we point others to God, inviting them to "come and see" and "follow."

In the midst of our heated and contentious society, we need to read these clear and simple words from Jesus, so that we might be salt and light for the world for such a time as this. Indeed, when people encounter us--as individuals and as communities of faith--

they should see and sense more. We are called to be a transformational difference in the world, so that all who watch us will feel new life, new vitality, new possibility, new hope, new beauty. Those who have will share with those who need, those who are free will loosen the bonds of those who are yoked with injustice, and those with shelter will extend it to the homeless and the refugee.

If you want to know what it's looked like lately to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, go online and look at all the pictures world-wide from the Women's March on January 21. Regardless of your opinions, observations, or objections, this was a testament to, and an embodiment of, what you do when you truly believe that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. You just do it. You don't debate it. You don't second-guess it. You don't wonder about it. You just go and be it. That's Jesus' point. Jesus doesn't say think about it. He doesn't say you will be, you may be, or try to be. No, you just are. You are salt and light. Period.

And as Eugene Peterson closes this scripture in *The Message*, "We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill.... Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand--shine! Keep open house, be generous with your lives." Amen!